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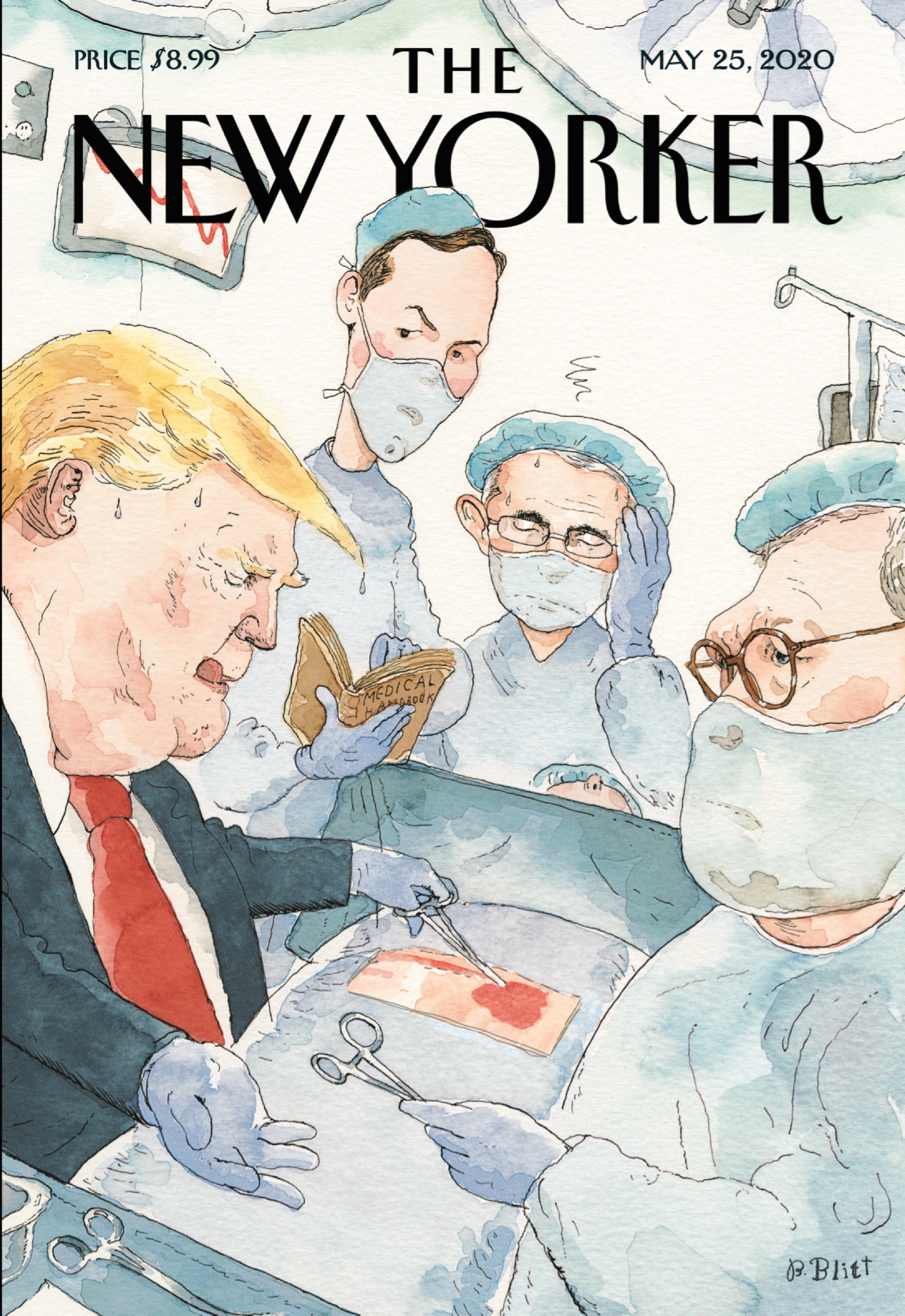
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THE NEW YORKER

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Charles Bethea on the cultural divide over the coronavirus response in rural Washington State.

DISPATCH
As the COVID-19 shutdown persists, an already struggling middle class is hurting. Eliza Griswold reports.

Download the New Yorker Today app for the latest news, commentary, criticism, and humor, plus this week's magazine and all issues back to 2008.

LEFT: MICHAEL HANSON FOR THE NEW YORKER; RIGHT: TALLULAH FONTAINE

THE MAIL

MEDICAL TROUBLES

Siddhartha Mukherjee's engrossing exposé of the weaknesses in America's health-care system explains how electronic medical records have not lived up to their promise ("After the Storm," May 4th). Their failure to enable clinicians to efficiently track patient care is particularly evident among migrant farmworkers with urgent or ongoing health needs, who frequently travel for work and must navigate a new health system after each move. The coronavirus has further constricted this population's access to care, as some mobile health services that usually reach farmworker camps have been suspended or scaled back.

I've been a clinician for twenty-five years, and throughout that time I have hoped for the promise of electronic medical records to be realized. But in the face of the system's inadequacy we must fill the holes. My nonprofit program, the Migrant Clinicians Network, does virtual case management for migrants by finding them new health centers when they move, booking appointments, and transferring medical records from one system to the next. In an ideal world, this service would be unnecessary. With the onslaught of the pandemic, we have to implement such novel solutions to meet our patients' needs.

Laszlo Madaras
Chief Medical Officer
Migrant Clinicians Network
Austin, Texas

"SESAME STREET" RESPONDS

"When Ernie Met Bert," by Jill Lepore, is an inaccurate portrayal of Sesame Workshop's history and operations (A Critic at Large, May 11th). *The New Yorker* never asked us to comment or to verify facts, and the result is not only a misrepresentation of our past but a mischaracterization of our present. The Jim Henson Company's decision to sell its Muppets to Disney has nothing to do with us; our Muppets are separate, and remain our property. Our arrangement with HBO, far from betraying the spirit of our founding, provides the funding necessary for "Sesame Street" to continue to be produced at the highest quality and to appear on PBS at no cost.

I am happy to defend how we fight the good fight every day to help kids grow smarter, stronger, and kinder in a world in which not enough people care about early-childhood development. We have used the same formative research model since our earliest days, relying on careful testing with children, expert input, and the highest educational standards to create the most nutritious show available to kids today. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's famous quip "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts" is one of the most enduringly relevant lines ever uttered by a twentieth-century New Yorker. This magazine's account of "Sesame Street" can be trusted on neither score.

Jeffrey D. Dunn
President and C.E.O.
Sesame Workshop
New York City

LOSING YOUR GRIP

Micah Hauser, in his meditation on the death of the handshake after COVID-19, describes some historical ways of greeting people (The Talk of the Town, May 4th). Fans of the Marx Brothers must protest one particular variant's being left off his list. The "Harpo Handshake," as it was practiced in the offices of the Boston *Globe* during the last years of the twentieth century, involved each party grasping the other's raised left leg with their right hand. I was spotted, with Martin Nolan, the editor of the editorial page, doing the Harpo on the edge of the newsroom by Jack Driscoll, the editor of the *Globe*. He rubbed his chin and said, "Jeez, I hope this doesn't catch on."

Margo Miller
Boston, Mass.

•

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

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In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, New York City museums, galleries, theatres, music venues, and cinemas have closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found online and streaming.

MAY 20 – 26, 2020

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

Ballet Hispánico had big plans for its fiftieth anniversary: two weeks at the Joyce, new works, a retrospective. Instead, it's limited to releasing content online, with weekly watch parties ("El Beso" is on May 20). Still, there's a lot to celebrate. Born out of a small Manhattan school and ensemble, Hispánico is now a thriving institution with gorgeous dancers. Two of them, the married couple Melissa Verdecia and Lyvan Verdecia (above, sheltering in Miami), represent the new Ballet Hispánico—vibrant, diverse, and amazingly versatile.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROSE MARIE CROMWELL

MUSIC

Rudolf Buchbinder: “The Diabelli Project”

CLASSICAL Before Instagram, it took some time to get artists on board with a music challenge. In 1819, when the publisher Anton Diabelli asked for variations on a basic waltz he’d written, it took five years to compile entries from fifty-one composers; Beethoven, forever mobbed by the Muses, submitted thirty-three versions. To celebrate the composer’s sestercentennial, the pianist Rudolf Buchbinder has released “The Diabelli Project,” a double disk of Beethoven’s opus and newly commissioned variations. Jörg Widmann’s demented contribution, the most fun among them, delights with its warped harmonic underpinning and jazzy walking bass line. As a kind of bonus, Buchbinder gives fleet-fingered performances of eight lesser-known pieces from Diabelli’s original anthology, including a flashy number by an eleven-year-old Franz Liszt.—*Oussama Zahr*

“In Order to Care”

TECHNO Electronic-dance compilations tend to be uneven as a rule, and “In Order to Care,” a forty-three-track collection from London’s R&S Records, is no exception. Still, the label’s unusually sharp roster gives the release a distinct leg up, as does its spirited tone, deeply rooted in nineties rave, which lends much of the material an inviting mischievousness, particularly on riff-driven tunes from Anz, Lone, India Jordan, and Forest Drive West. The collection’s musical merits aside, its proceeds go toward buying personal protective equipment for Britain’s National Health Service.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

Okkyung Lee: “Yeo-Neun”

CONTEMPORARY CLASSICAL The cellist and composer Okkyung Lee was classically trained in her native South Korea before exploring jazz and earning a degree in film scoring in Boston. Since arriving in New York, in 2000, she has moved freely among the city’s disparate new-music communities. Listening to “Yeo-Neun”—on which Lee plays alongside the harpist Maeve Gilchrist, the bassist Eivind Opsvik, and the pianist Jacob Sacks—you sense that some part of each experience has found its way into the mix. A sentimentality Lee ascribes to Korean music permeates the recording’s gently swinging chamber works, punctuated by subtly abrasive gestures. The results are sweetly wistful and instantly ingratiating.—*Steve Smith*

The Magnetic Fields: “Quickies”

ROCK “All the d.j.s keep complaining tunes run much too long,” goes a particularly succinct Shel Silverstein lyric. “So I’ve gone and wrote myself a twenty-six-second song.” On “Quickies,” the Magnetic Fields drink to such droll brevity, with pieces ranging from about thirteen seconds to a Grateful Dead-esque two and a half minutes. Silverstein would have found much to admire here, while likely recognizing the songwriter Stephin Merritt as a rare kindred spirit—a mordant wit whose work connects upon contact, and whose obvious sophistication never curtails his naughty streak. (The title track soon finds a rhyme with “hickey.”) Alongside the Magnetic Fields’ sweeping “69 Love Songs” and “50 Song Memoir,” “Quickies” might seem minor by design. Yet Merritt is a miniaturist: where many songwriters go decades without proffering a world view, he squeezes his into an eyeblink. “Billions laughed and no one cried,” opens one song, “the day the politicians died.”—*Jay Ruttenberg*

Aisha Orazbayeva: “Music for Violin Alone”

CLASSICAL Aisha Orazbayeva, a brilliant London-based Kazakh violinist, performs contemporary works with expressive assurance and deploys avant-garde techniques that elicit a jolting freshness from the early-music canon. Those stylistic approaches converge on “Music for Violin Alone,” her return to action after two years of maternity leave. Yes, the title of the album, recorded at home in April, alludes to COVID-19-enforced isolation. But the program—which includes intensely physical exercises by Angharad Davies and Orazbayeva herself, as well as pieces by Bach, Matteis, and Tenney—attests to a self-sufficiency rooted in the unanimity of head, heart, and hands.—*S.S.*

Gary Smulyan: “Our Contrafacts”

JAZZ A contrafact, a longtime jazz convention, is an original melody superimposed over the chord progression of a preëxisting song. If, in the course of listening to “It Happens,” from the baritone saxophonist Gary Smulyan’s intriguing album “Our Contrafacts,” you find yourself humming Michel Legrand’s “Watch What Happens,” well, you’ve got the idea. Smulyan, a mainstream master of the big horn, has devoted previous albums to contrafacts composed by others; here, he and his sterling associates, David Wong on bass and Rodney Green on drums, contribute their own clever adaptations, which provide fertile terrain for improvisation—invention upon reinvention, as it were.—*Steve Futterman*

Moses Sumney: “græ”

AVANT-GARDE POP Even if the singer-songwriter Moses Sumney had limited his album “græ” to the twelve aching, soul-driven songs that he dropped in February, the project would have been a masterwork—timeless, theatrical, and whimsical, all at once. But Sumney is unrelenting and prolific, and he has been waiting to release eight additions to complete his twenty-track opus. These new songs are as gorgeously enigmatic as the first part of the record: “Bystanders,” shaped from beatific choral loops, and “Lucky Me,” with its naked simplicity, continue to build an untethered, genreless space for Sumney, whose androgynous falsetto soars over a mix of orchestral chamber pop and deconstructed, stripped-back R. & B. The haunting avant-experiment “before you go” closes the album, offering breathing room after Sumney’s staggering performance.—*Julyssa Lopez*

QUEER POP

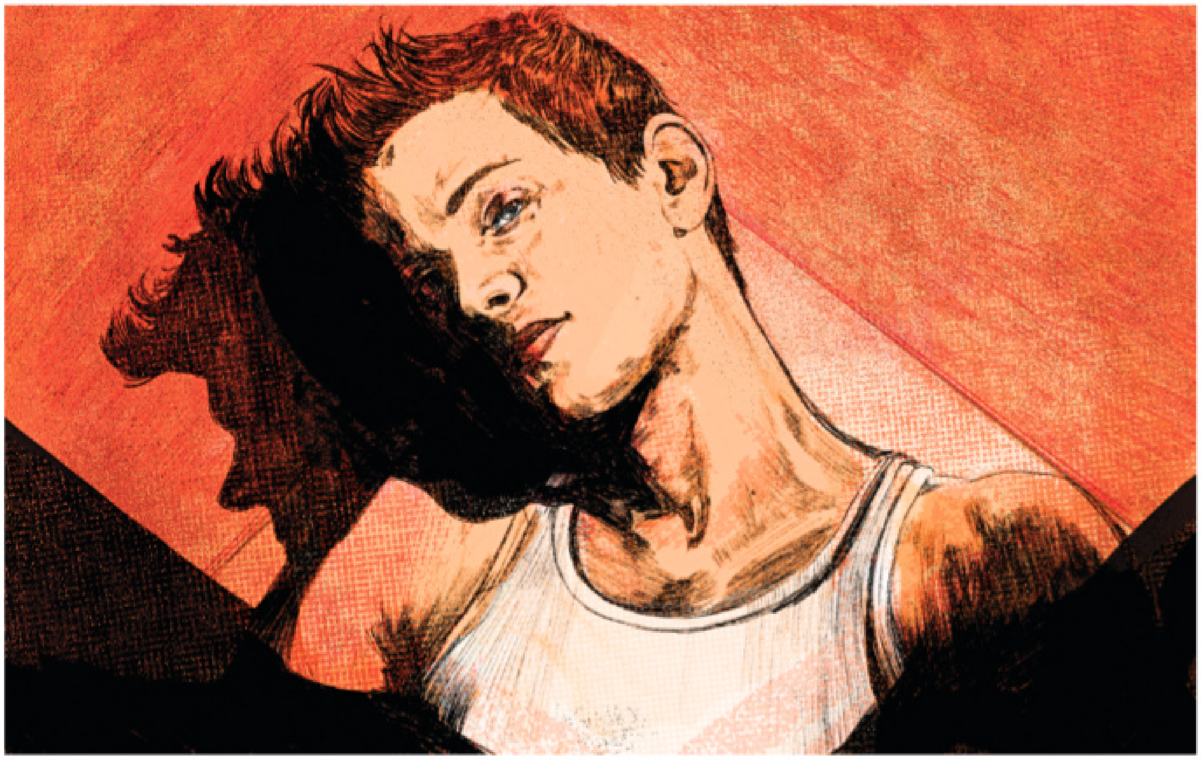
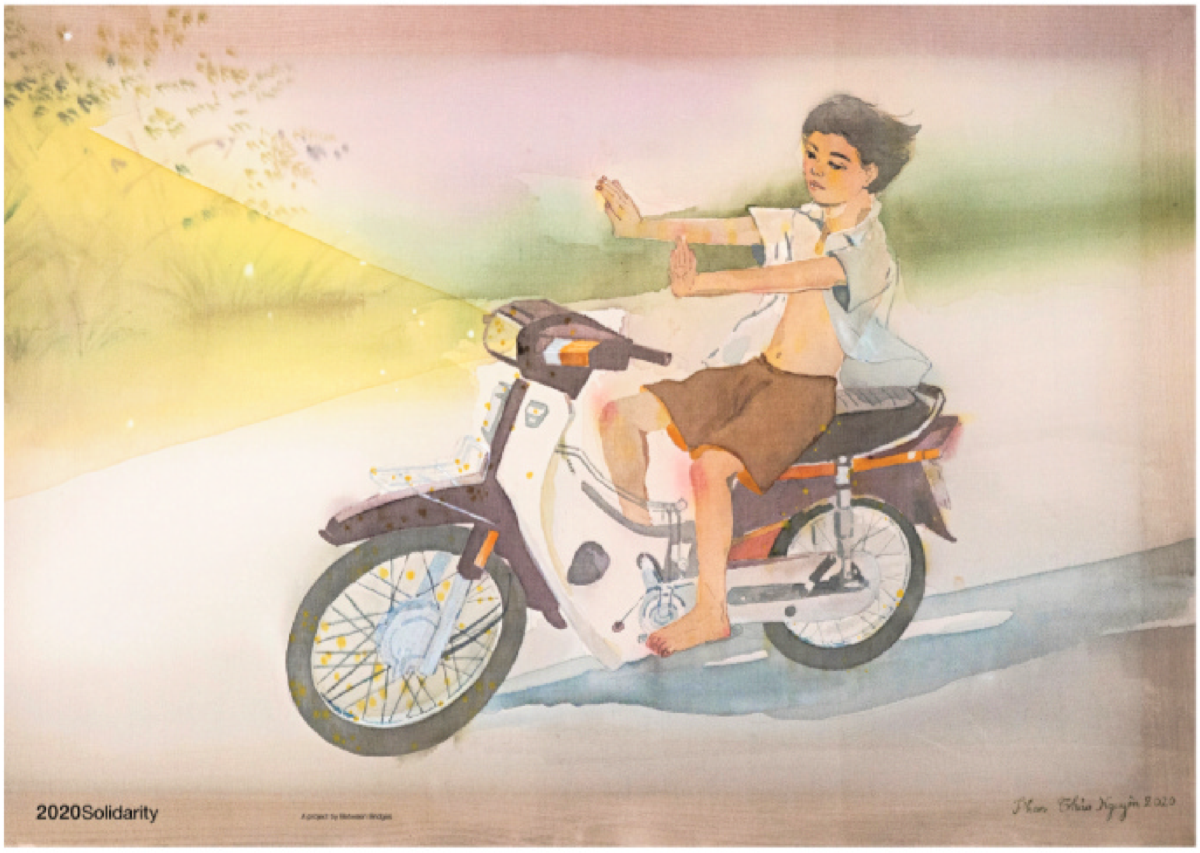


ILLUSTRATION BY NICOLE RIFKIN

“For a long time, my world has been based off how I was treated when I was fourteen,” Mark Hadreas, who performs as **Perfume Genius,** told *The New Yorker* in 2017. His music often celebrates the divine feminine with shimmery, heavily scented synth productions that embrace the theatricality that gay boys are told to tone down at a young age, and his lyrics invert pain into beauty like a modern-day Jean Genet. On his new album, “Set My Heart on Fire Immediately,” Hadreas experiments with masculine signifiers—rock distortion (“Describe”), a battery of percussion (“Your Body Changes Everything”)—to express same-sex desire. With the rapturous dance-pop of “On the Floor,” he channels Madonna’s “True Blue” as he loses himself in an idealized crush. For Hadreas, the tension between inhabiting and reaching beyond his own experience is a source of continued inspiration.—*Oussama Zahr*

ART FOR RELIEF


2020Solidarity
A project by Between Bridges

COURTESY BETWEEN BRIDGES

Like sane people everywhere, artists are practicing social distancing. They're also banding together, and not just on Zoom. More than fifty international artists (and counting) have contributed posters to **2020Solidarity,** a project from the Between Bridges foundation, the brainchild of the photographer Wolfgang Tillmans. All proceeds from the unlimited editions—by the likes of Marlene Dumas, Isa Genzken, Wade Guyton, Glenn Ligon, Thomas Struth, Carrie Mae Weems, and Christopher Wool—will support the project rooms, publishers, residencies, cinémathèques, and festivals that help bring contemporary art to light. The posters are available for a donation of fifty dollars, euros, or pounds, depending on the organization's location (details and images are at betweenbridges.net). Beneficiaries of the charming "March on a Honda Dream" (pictured above), by the Ho Chi Minh City-based artist Thao Nguyen Phan, for example, include Visual AIDS and the International Studio & Curatorial Program, both in New York City, as well as concerns in Berlin, Lausanne, London, and Rome. The prevailing spirit is hope, tinged with romance, as in Nicole Eisenman's wistful closing-time sketch "Never Forget Kissing in Bars."—*Andrea K. Scott*

ART

"Félix Fénéon"

This terrific show, now languishing in darkened galleries at the Museum of Modern Art, should not pass uncelebrated—or unvisited, to the extent that MOMA's Web site ameliorates the lockdown. Its brilliant subject is Félix Fénéon, a shadowy French aesthete and political anarchist who was also a sometime art critic, dealer, collector, and journal editor, and a legendarily sardonic wit—not an artist but an art-world sparkplug. Best known for having coined, in 1886, the term "Neo-Impressionism," and for his championing of Georges Seurat, he is characterized in the show's catalogue as "implacable, inscrutable, meticulous, and mysterious." Lanky and sporting an Uncle Sam-like goatee (Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec portrayed him in profile at the Moulin Rouge, accompanied by a rotund Oscar Wilde), Fénéon merits nothing so much as the latter-day American honorific "cool." The online Fénéon show is a waterslide into the lore of a staggeringly clever man who epitomizes a heyday of audacities in pell-mell, modernizing Paris. He never wrote a book. He cut a practically invisible figure in public. But, once you've made his acquaintance, he may pester any thoughts you have of the era, like something that is glimpsed and then, when you look, isn't there.—*Peter Schjeldahl (moma.org)*

Morgan Bassichis

If your nighttime routine now includes insomnia, Morgan Bassichis wants you to know that you're not alone. Since New York City hit Pause in March, the irresistibly charismatic performer—whose sui-generis style blends cabaret panache and standup shtick with grace notes of klezmer—has been posting comforting "quarantunes" on Instagram (@morgankindof), including the lullaby "I know it's weird to go to bed now." Like the full-length performances that have earned Bassichis a loyal following from Fire Island to the Whitney Museum, the intimate clip is funny, strange, exquisitely sung, and unexpectedly moving. (A selection of videos of past events is available on the artist's Web site.) Onstage, Bassichis often repeats simple lyrics—"I know you're scared, I'm scared too"—until they accrue the power of incantations. The quarantunes have that same magic, along with some good advice for bad times: "I'll tell you the secret. Take a shower."—*Andrea K. Scott (morganbassichis.com)*

Marie Laurencin

Laurencin was a Parisian painter and an avant-garde saloniste—a friend to Picabia and Braque—whose ambrosial variant of Cubism looks like fuzzed-out rococo. She worked as a society portraitist, but the results didn't always capture her sitter's likeness, as Coco Chanel once complained. The first New York show of the artist's work since her death, in 1956, is deftly curated by Jelena Kristic at the U.S. outpost of the German Galerie Buchholz (now on view via the gallery's Web site). The selections underscore Laurencin's devotion to her favorite subject: beautiful girls and young women. One melancholic canvas, from 1924, in which a lady in a pink plumed hat holds a small dog, is typical of the artist's soft-focus sensibility: seen against drab walls, the woman's complexion is so luminous that her nose disappears in its glow. Other delightful works make folkloric or classical references, with Edenic backdrops and goddesslike figures. Laurencin, an eccentric, formidable talent in a male-dominated milieu, once wrote of men that "living in their shadow is possible, when one doesn't intend to imitate them." Judging by this delightful presentation, she didn't intend to paint them too often, either.—*Johanna Fateman (galeriebuchholz.de)*

"Well Now WTF?"

As most of the art world moves online, sometimes awkwardly, this free-for-all of GIFs recalls the energy and the ethos of networked art's early decades. The curators Faith Holland, Lorna Mills, and Wade Wallerstein launched the project, in early April, on the Web site Silicon Valet, which is billed as "a new parking lot for digital art and expanded practice." Now more than a hundred artists fill the exhibition's "rooms" with moving-image abstractions, hypnagogic still-lifes, and satirical micro-vignettes (which can suggest absurdist ripostes in an unhinged group text). There are also short videos, including one by the jump-cut surrealist-camp innovator Ryan Trecartin, and an unsettling concrete poem for the screen-saver era, by Nicole Killian. Related events, with real-time interactions, stream on an accompanying Twitch channel. (The artist and Tumblr phenom Molly Soda's tour of the platform was one recent offering.) Over all, the dense and frenetic oasis is appealingly different from the dominant virtual-gallery vibe: instead of seeking a return to normalcy, these renegades test the formal and conceptual possibilities of remote connection.—*J.F. (wellnow.wtf)*

DANCE

New York City Ballet

The company's virtual spring season continues with a mixed bill of ballets by Christopher Wheeldon, on May 22, and Balanchine's classic "Donizetti Variations," on May 26. (They will be released at 8 P.M. and remain online for three days.) Wheeldon dipped his toe into the genre of American musical theatre with "Carousel (A Dance)," from 2002. The pas de deux, inspired by Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Carousel," contains many of the themes of the 1945 musical: a young woman attracted to and manipulated by an older man, a nascent love shaded by future tragedy. (Thirteen years later, Wheeldon would go on to direct "An American in Paris" on Broadway.) Wheeldon's "Liturgy," set to music by the monkish Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, uses a slow, acrobatic, runelike vocabulary to suggest flight, meditation, and spiritual quest. In contrast, "Donizetti Variations" is a bubbly delight, buoyed by Donizetti's melodic and witty ballet music (from the opera "Don Sebastian").—*Marina Harss (nycballet.com)*

DanceAfrica

For the first time in forty-three years, the Brooklyn Academy of Music won't reverberate with African drums, rhythmic footfalls, and call-and-response cries of "*Ago! Ame!*" But the DanceAfrica festival is still happening online, with classes, conversations, archival video, a dance party, and even a digital-marketplace version of the normally outdoor bazaar. On May 20, the esteemed choreographers Rennie Harris and Ronald K. Brown share DanceAfrica memories and videos of past performances. On May 25, the festival's original producer, Mikki Shepard, discusses its genesis and growth and streams footage from the early years.—*Brian Seibert (bam.org)*

"Dance at City Center"

With its theatre closed, New York City Center has been offering a taste of dance on Instagram and YouTube, periodically adding to a collection of performance excerpts, mainly from its popular "Fall for Dance" series. The playlist includes a dose of ardent loveliness—Isabella Boylston and Calvin Royal III in Christopher Wheeldon's "This Bitter Earth"—as well as snippets of the Trisha Brown duet "You Can See Us" and Sonya Tayeh's "Unveiling," featuring Robert Fairchild. This week, in time for National Tap Dance Day, those selections are joined by a jolt of Michelle Dorrance's adrenalized "Myelination."—*B.S. (nycitycenter.org)*

JoyceStream: "And Still You Must Swing"

In celebration of National Tap Dance Day, on May 25, the Joyce is streaming "And Still You Must Swing," one of last year's very best dance productions. Joined by a jazz combo, three of the world's greatest hoofers—Dormeshia, Derick K. Grant, and Jason Samuels Smith—give an as-good-as-it-gets demonstration of tap artistry in solos and group turns. So deep is their mastery, so rich is their shared history, that they can be laser-precise and loose, serious and playful, honoring tradition while pushing the envelope of technique. The show, including a new artist talkback, is available through May 26.—*B.S. (joyce.org/engage/joycestream)*

PODCASTS

In the Dark

The podcast "In the Dark," produced by APM Reports and hosted by Madeleine Baran, deftly combines narrative art with hard-core investigative journalism; after its second season, about Curtis Flowers, who has been tried six times for the same 1996 crime in Winona, Mississippi, it became the first podcast to help free someone from prison by propelling a case to the Supreme Court. During the reporting for a new story, the pandemic hit—and Baran and her team, isolating in their home base of Minnesota, were inundated with calls from Mississippi. "Coronavirus in the Delta," an impromptu new season, examines the COVID-19 crisis in one of the poorest parts of the U.S., drawing from pastors, prison inmates, doctors, and others to create a focussed, inquisitive portrait of institutional dysfunction and human adaptivity. At Parchman prison, one inmate says that, in the absence of masks, prisoners try to protect themselves from the coronavirus by tying dirty socks around their faces; another, in solitary confinement in Curtis Flowers's former cell, manages his fear with breathing exercises he learned from watching "Dr. Oz": "I inhale and I hold it, and I exhale and I release."—*Sarah Larson*

Wind of Change

The whistling-infused power ballad "Wind of Change," by the German hair-metal band the Scorpions, came out shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall and helped inspire millions of perestroika-era Soviet youths to seize "the magic of the moment"; the U.S.S.R. fell a year later. This new series, from the *New Yorker* staff writer Patrick Radden Keefe, Pineapple Street Studios, Spotify, and Crooked Media, investigates a delicious question: Is the C.I.A. secretly responsible for writing it? Keefe takes listeners on an artfully produced adventure across the globe, hunting down clues involving former spooks, drug kingpins, a mysterious rock festival in Moscow, and the secret history of the C.I.A. working with artists. Each episode prompts reflections about the power of culture to influence hearts and minds; at a Scorpions concert in Kyiv, Keefe stands among thousands of Ukrainians singing "Wind of Change" and realizes that, to them, the song "may not feel anachronistic." The podcast prompts reflections about journalism, too. At one point, Keefe asks, "What if the person spreading C.I.A. propaganda is me?"—*S.L.*

MOVIES

Capone

This idiosyncratic bio-pic, written and directed by Josh Trank, dramatizes—sometimes discerningly, sometimes garishly—the former gang lord's final year, spent at his Florida compound as his mind and body are ravaged by syphilis, among other ailments. Tom Hardy stars as Al Capone—called, by friends and family, Fonz—who, in his lucid moments, is haunted by the thought that, years earlier, he had hidden ten million dollars in cash and can no longer recall its whereabouts. Capone's gangland frenemies are trying to get hold of the stash before he dies—and so is an F.B.I. agent (Jack Lowden) who has it in for him. Meanwhile, Capone's derangement is depicted in hallucinatory sequences of tormented visions in which his erstwhile pleasures and gory crimes are luridly intertwined. Sharply observed scenes of Capone's debility—as when he fails to remember his name or his surroundings, and launches into cheesy movie-character imitations—are undercut by the flip psychology of the fantasy scenes. With Linda

PODCAST DEPT.

In **"Articles of Interest,"** the relentlessly delightful Avery Trufelman, a producer on the design podcast "99% Invisible," investigates stories about clothing, including, in the first season, denim, punk, plaid, and pockets. Season 2 takes on luxury. The first episode begins with a museum's collection of creepy dolls and explores, via characters including a historical figure named Alma de Bretteville Spreckels, the preservation of fashion in postwar France. The second episode, on knockoffs, frames ideas about trademarks, creativity, and class with the story of the influential Harlem designer Dapper Dan. Trufelman observes that our desires can manifest themselves "in strange and seemingly frivolous ways"; listening to the series, the value of those manifestations is never in doubt.—*Sarah Larson*

ILLUSTRATION BY NHUNG LÊ

Cardellini, as Capone's wife, Mae, and Matt Dillon, as an elusive associate.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Amazon, iTunes, and other services.)*

Driveways

This mild and sentimental tale of a lonely boy's consoling friendship with an elderly man is one of the late Brian Dennehy's last films. It's set in a small town in upstate New York, where Kathy (Hong Chau), a medical transcriber and aspiring nurse from Michigan, and her eight-year-old son, Cody (Lucas Jaye), travel to clean out the house of her recently deceased sister. The quiet and scholarly boy (Kathy calls him Professor) doesn't fit in with the local children; Del (Dennehy), the crusty widower next door, notices and takes Cody under his wing. The director, Andrew Ahn, working with a script by Hannah Bos and Paul Thureen, hits obvious notes of gentle poignancy; each brief and spare scene stirs simple and easy emotions while leaving the characters mere ciphers. Nonetheless, the three lead actors carry the movie and do the heavy dramatic lifting gracefully; their sheer presence reaches far beyond the confines of the story.—*R.B. (Streaming on Amazon, Google Play, and YouTube.)*

Joan of Arc

For the second installment in Bruno Dumont's diptych, the director follows his 2017 rock opera, "Jeannette"—in which the child Joan prepares to fight France's English occupiers—with the sombre and ironic balladry of a defeated young warrior facing execution at the hands of her enemies. The ten-year-old Lise Leplat Prudhomme plays Joan, who defies King Charles VII (Fabrice Luchini) and leads her troops into disastrous battle, first at the gates of Paris and then at Amiens, where she is captured. Half the movie is set in and around a cathedral, where she's interrogated by church officials under English command. Adapting a play by Charles Péguy, Dumont turns the tale into a dialectical spectacle: he stages military musters like Busby Berkeley productions, seethes at the torturers' rationalizations, delights in hearing his actors declaim the scholars' sophistries, and thrills in the pugnacious simplicity of Joan's defiant responses, which reduce her captors' pride to ridicule. With music by the singer-songwriter Christophe (who died of COVID-19 in April).—*R.B. (Streaming on Film at Lincoln Center's Virtual Cinema.)*

Marjoe

As a child star of the gospel circuit, Marjoe Gortner, pressured into service by his evangelist parents, made them millions—of which he saw none. As an adult, he returned to the ministry and got his revenge through this engrossing documentary, from 1972, in which he collaborates with the directors Sarah Kernochan and Howard Smith to deconstruct the showmanship of lucrative "big-time religion." With his loose-limbed gyrations, Marjoe was a rock star for the devout and he knew it, explaining how he borrowed moves from Mick Jagger. But, as scenes of extravagant gospel performances and diverse preaching styles make clear, the borrowing went both ways. Marjoe acknowledges that the film's release will force him to leave the calling (or quit the act), and he fears for his future in a droll conundrum that he delivers both to the camera and to his new, secular girlfriend: "Can God deliver a religion addict?"—*R.B. (Streaming on Tubi, Amazon, and other services.)*

Privilege

In this activist metafiction, from 1990, Yvonne Rainer develops vast ideas from a simple premise: a documentary in which she interviews women about menopause. Then she introduces a fictional director named Yvonne Washington (played by Novella Nelson) and turns the documentary into a film-within-a-film. Yvonne, a black woman (Rainer is white), interviews a middle-aged white character named Jenny (Alice Spivak), who reminisces about the freewheeling nineteen-sixties on the Lower East Side. Jenny's story is shown in flashbacks detailing her relationships with a white lesbian neighbor (Blaire Baron) and a Puerto Rican couple (Gabriella Farrar and Rico Elias). Yvonne analyzes Jenny's tale to reveal the prevalence of rape, domestic violence, and unchallenged racism in public and private life—and she does so with such varied cinematic devices as voice-overs, fantasy scenes, and text on a computer screen. Suggesting that political progress can't emerge from conservative storytelling, Rainer expands consciousness to inspire social change.—*R.B. (Streaming on the Criterion Channel and Kanopy.)*

Wild Rose

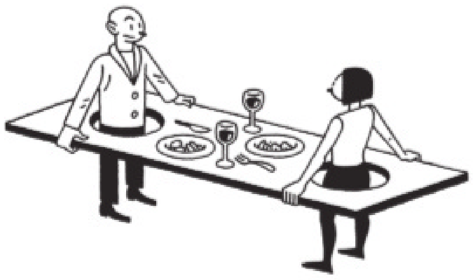
Tom Harper's film stars Jessie Buckley as Rose-Lynn Harlan, a young Scottish woman with two small children, a disapproving mother (Julie Walters), and a prison record. Her great love is country music, and her ambition is to visit Nashville; she even keeps a map of Tennessee on her bedroom wall. For now, however, she is stuck in Glasgow. There, she gets a job with a polite Englishwoman named Susannah (Sophie Okonedo), who hatches a plan, at once benign and condescending, to further Rose-Lynn's career. The movie, written by Nicole Taylor, belongs to Buckley, who lends it toughness and ardor, and whose impulsive conduct—whether she is singing her heart and her guts out at a local club or swigging from the bottles of Susannah's booze—seems less predictable than the plot. Rose-Lynn even drags her stern-faced lawyer onto the dance floor. That takes nerve.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 7/1/19.) (Streaming on Hulu and other services.)*

For more reviews, visit
newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town

WHAT TO STREAM

WERNER HERZOG FILM / TCD / PROD.DB / ALAMY

The streaming service Tubi offers, free of charge, a cinematic grab bag of treasures scattered among odds and ends. Although it features many public-domain films (including such classics as Orson Welles's "The Stranger"), sometimes in bleary copies, it also has a notable collection of international films, ranging from Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's "A Screaming Man" and Maren Ade's "The Forest for the Trees" to Jean-Luc Godard's "Film Socialisme," as well as eighteen of Werner Herzog's films, including the poignant and fierce **"Stroszek,"** from 1977. It stars the street musician Bruno S., a nonprofessional actor, as Bruno Stroszek, a street musician in Berlin, whose relationship with a prostitute named Eva (Eva Mattes) gets them in trouble with gangsters. The couple takes off for rural Wisconsin, along with their elderly friend Herr Scheitz (Clemens Scheitz), but Stroszek's American dream veers into a nightmare of debt and isolation. Bruno S. is one of the cinema's great holy innocents, and Herzog's vision of his disillusionment and despair rises to a hectic pitch of absurdist tragedy.—*Richard Brody*



TABLES FOR TWO

Blue Hill Boxes

The other day, a procession of cars on a road near Stone Barns Center, the nonprofit educational farm in Pocantico Hills, New York, halted in its tracks to make way for goslings: a gaggle of them, waddling across the pavement. For decades, Dan Barber, the chef and co-owner of Blue Hill at Stone Barns and its sister restaurant, Blue Hill, in Greenwich Village, has been using his restaurants to familiarize diners with the principles of sustainable agriculture.

He has long been aware, he told me recently, of the flaws in the farm-to-table model. "It wasn't exactly the most equitable or open-arms food chain," he said—as of March, the prix fixe at Blue Hill in Manhattan was ninety-five dollars per person, and the tasting menu at Stone Barns was two hundred and seventy-eight. What Barber didn't realize was how incredibly fragile the model was. "I still would have argued that it was the most resilient in terms of health, flavor, ecological functioning," he said. But enter the coronavirus "and it just collapses."

Both restaurants are closed for the foreseeable future, but what worries Barber even more than the question of when and how to reopen them is the question of whether his most trusted suppliers—much of whose revenue comes from restaurants, in some cases largely from Blue Hill alone—will still be there when he does. Preventing the collapse of the supply chain is a main objective of an evolving program he's calling resourcED, a C.S.A. for the most discerning aesthete.

The week before last, I made a reservation to pick up a stack of sleek cardboard boxes containing an array of astonishingly lovely things to eat, accompanied by illustrated broadsheets that described every item in painstaking detail and offered suggestions for what to do with each. In my produce box, a bundle of sweet carrots as tiny as golf pencils, just dug from the earth ("if you must cook them, do it with a gentle hand"), cozied up to fat spears of asparagus ("kiss on a grill") and to a Mason jar of wheat berries sealed with cheesecloth, ready to be sprouted. In the corners of my bread box, tins of butter—made with "single udder" milk from a cow named Billie, in different seasons—played sentry to an enormous sourdough miche, made from freshly milled local grains and inspired by Barber's stint as a young cook in France.

The garde-manger box—named for the station in a restaurant kitchen where sides, salads, and condiments are composed—turned my refrigerator into the cold case at an exquisite gourmet grocery store, neatly stacked with fresh linguine (to be tossed with stinging-nettle pistou); pork rillettes, capped in a layer of thick white fat; and miso made from nixtamalized corn and sake refuse, to name just a few.

The garde-manger box perhaps best illustrates Barber's approach to weathering the pandemic, and to preparing for future disasters. In the U.S., he said, "processed food" is "the lowest bar. It's an insult." But transforming agricultural products into shelf-stable ones is "what everyone else in the history of the world, for ten thousand years, has figured out. There are flushes of harvest everywhere, and you better do something to the harvest that preserves it—and, by the way, makes it more delicious, and more nutritious." Keeping his favorite independent farms and day-boat fishermen afloat, he realized, would require thinking of himself less as a restaurant chef than as a food processor.

At a price range of sixty-eight to a hundred and seventy dollars—which barely covers his costs, Barber says, even with the kitchen staff pared down by half—the resourcEd boxes are hardly cheap. But for the quality of food they provide they're more affordable than a lot of takeout, and designed to last much longer. They're a bargain compared to dinner at Stone Barns, and arguably even more pleasurable, freed from the pomp of fine dining. My only complaint is proof of success: the contents of the boxes were so beautiful that they filled me with anxiety, unable to bear the thought of wasting a single bite. *(Boxes $68-$170.)*

—Hannah Goldfield

PHOTOGRAPH BY HEATHER STEN FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

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THE
NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
CATNIP FOR CRANKS

On January 6, 2017, at around 8:30 A.M., Donald Trump undoubtedly had serious matters on his mind. In just two weeks, he would come into possession of the nuclear codes, attempt to fill out the upper ranks of the federal government, and assume responsibility for the course of American policy at home and abroad. So he picked up his phone and began to tweet an assessment of his replacement on "The Celebrity Apprentice":

> Wow. The ratings are in and Arnold Schwarzenegger got "swamped" (or destroyed) by comparison to the ratings machine, DJT. So much for . . . being a movie star—and that was season 1 compared to season 14. Now compare him to my season 1. But who cares, he supported Kasich & Hillary.

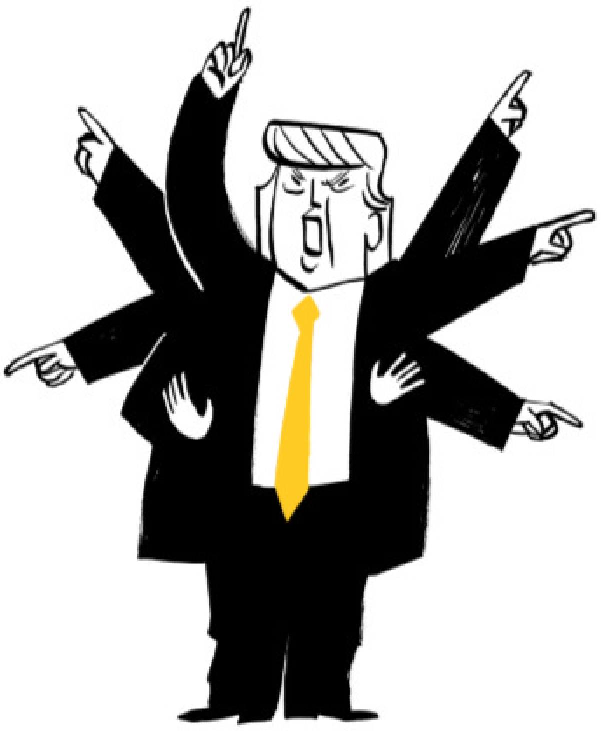
In the years to come, Trump's social-media goals expanded. His tweets and retweets, which can come at a fevered rate of more than a hundred a day, provide real-time talking points for right-wing media outlets, and are absorbed as doctrine by millions of faithful constituents. As President, Trump takes to Twitter to declare who is "pathetic" and who is "dopey," who is a "total nut job" and who is a "low class slob." He fires staff and touts the dimensions of his "Nuclear Button." The tone is so consistently devoid of empathy, good faith, or good will that even "HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY" sounds like a threat.

The Library of America recently put out a collection of writings by the Columbia University historian Richard Hofstadter. It includes two full-length studies published in the early nineteen-sixties: "Anti-Intellectualism in American Life" and "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." Hofstadter was trying, in part, to understand right-wing leaders, such as Senators Joseph McCarthy and Barry Goldwater, and the prevalence of an antipathy toward expertise and an embrace of conspiracy theories that had been, he wrote, "catnip for cranks of all kinds." Hofstadter, who died in 1970, saw the country as "an arena of uncommonly angry minds," and it is hard to read him and not think of Trump's dark descants on "the Deep State," "the Enemy of the People," and, now, "Obamagate."

In "The Paranoid Style," Hofstadter quotes McCarthy, speaking in 1951, on the "parlous" state of America:

> "How can we account for our present situation unless we believe that men high in this government are concerting to deliver us to disaster? This must be the product of a great conspiracy, a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man."

McCarthy claimed that pro-Soviet Communist spies had infiltrated the military, the State Department, and the Eisenhower Administration. Joseph Nye Welch, the lawyer tasked with defending the Army against McCarthy's charges, told him, in a 1954 Senate hearing, "You have, I think, sir, something of a genius for creating confusion, creating turmoil in the hearts and minds of the country." That genius enabled McCarthy to win the support of nearly half of all Americans, but, after the Army-McCarthy hearings and a thorough dismantling by Edward R. Murrow, on CBS, he was brought low. McCarthy died at the age of forty-eight, in 1957.



Unlike McCarthy, Trump seems to have only one fixed idea, and it is about his own greatness. One day, he is talking about his abiding friendship with President Xi Jinping and China, "which has been working very hard to contain the Coronavirus." The next, he is insidiously referring to the "Chinese virus" and suggesting that Beijing should suffer consequences if it turns out that it was "knowingly responsible" for the existence of COVID-19. What Trump shares with McCarthy is the capacity to create confusion and turmoil, and it is emerging as the mainstay of his reëlection campaign.

Before the pandemic hit, Trump had

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

intended to lock in his base and then campaign hard in the battleground states, arguing that he had single-handedly built "the greatest economy in the history of the world." Today, he must campaign as an impeached President who has grossly mishandled a devastating assault on the national health and economy. In early March, he declared that the United States would steer the global effort against the pandemic: "The world is relying on us." Now the country leads the world only in the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths.

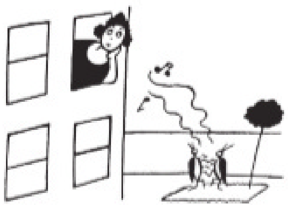
Trump's failure is rooted in a distrust of expertise, which has led him to rely on the dubious counsel of his circle of cronies and family members. One of his confidants told the *Financial Times* that, in the early weeks of the crisis, Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, "had been arguing that testing too many people, or ordering too many ventilators, would spook the markets and so we just shouldn't do it. That advice worked far more powerfully on him than what the scientists were saying." Trump now rejects the cautions of Anthony Fauci and other scientists about returning children to school as "not an acceptable answer." Meanwhile, more than eighty thousand people in this country have died of COVID-19. Unemployment is approaching Depression-era levels. And no one is able to make a convincing case either for an imminent improvement in the epidemiological outlook or for a "V-shaped" economic recovery.

As a result, the reëlection campaign will be even more shameless than originally conceived. Trump is running Facebook ads depicting Joe Biden as excessively sympathetic to China and cognitively diminished ("Joe Biden: Old and Out of It"). The President is above all trying to whip up a frenzy of paranoia about the Obama Administration's supposed efforts to promulgate the theory that the Trump campaign colluded with Russia. "Obamagate," according to the President, is an affair "worse than Watergate." The Justice Department, undermining the rule of law, has obediently asked that charges be dropped against Michael Flynn, the former national-security adviser, who admitted to lying to investigators about his contacts with Russia. In 2016, Trump's rallying cry was "Lock her up!" Now the calls for prosecution are directed at Barack Obama and Joe Biden.

The President, who began his political career with one Obama conspiracy theory—birtherism—now hopes to prolong it with a new one. Along the way, he has helped promote the idea that Antonin Scalia may have been murdered in his bed, that windmills cause cancer, and that voter fraud cost him the popular vote in 2016. Not that he is incapable of changing his mind. Trump used to tweet that vaccines may cause autism. Now he is hoping that a vaccine comes quick—sometime before November.

—*David Remnick*

DEPT. OF MISSING
PET SOUNDS



If you wake up anxious at four in the morning, as you may be wont to do these days—assuming that you fall asleep in the first place—you are likely to hear birdsong. That wouldn't be remarkable in, say, Larchmont, but it's downright eerie in most precincts of New York City, where dawn's twitters and chirps are usually drowned out by the hum of traffic, the rumble of garbage trucks, the clatter of subway trains, the echoing complaints of whoever is out and about. That sometimes glorious, sometimes aggravating all-hours din is what an old song called the "lullaby of Broadway," and, no offense to the birds, its absence during lockdown has been disconcerting.

To help fill this void, the New York Public Library recently issued its first-ever widely available album, on Spotify, titled "Missing Sounds of New York." Once again, you can thrill to the pulsing roar of a crowded bar or a packed baseball stadium. You can also be soothed by the calmer but perhaps even more evocative tones of a bustling city park or a lively side street—children playing, dogs barking, basketballs bouncing, passersby conversing in different languages. Did you ever think you'd miss the subway? You may be surprised at the bittersweet longing stirred by a cut that takes you through a rush-hour station and onto a train, metal-shredding brakes and all, where a hip-hop dance crew suddenly launches into a between-the-poles performance. There are eight tracks in all, full of hustle and clangor; they might even work as alternative sound-machine tones for sleepers immune to "Gentle Surf" or "Rain Falling on Fern Fronds."

"I think there's a poignancy about 'Missing Sounds' that resonates with so many people," said Carrie Welch, who, as the library's chief external-relations officer, oversees marketing and communications, among other areas. "The album wasn't meant to make people sad," she added, but it seems to, a little. Welch and her staff helped develop "Missing Sounds" with Mother New York, an independent creative agency that had been working with the library on a now postponed campaign celebrating its hundred-and-twenty-fifth anniversary. You could argue that the album also honors tenacity. Corinna Falusi, Mother New York's chief creative officer, said, "We all have a feeling of grieving for normality, and this felt like a comfort. It's a reminder that at some point *this* will be over, and we'll listen to *that* again." She said that she cried the first time she heard the album.

Anyone who has watched TV in quarantine has likely caught scenes of pre-COVID New York that pique nostalgia, even if they're only from February. Audio tracks, the thinking went, could be even more Proustian. "When you listen, your imagination brings you to those places and situations even more intimately," Falusi said, echoing a generation of grandparents who disapproved of TV because they grew up listening to "The Shadow" on the radio. Mother New York assembled the "Missing Sounds" tracks from scratch, utilizing the agency's extensive sound library and sometimes just crowdsourcing. "It was a lot of trolling friends' Instagrams and being, like, 'I saw you were in Central Park six months ago—do you have video?' and then pulling audio from that," Kim Chavez, a producer at the agency, explained.

Others were corralled into recording stray noises and dialogue. "When we were doing the ballgame track, we needed a lunatic screaming, 'Are you kidding me? How is that not a strike?'" Chavez said. "And I knew the perfect dude sitting up in the Bronx who would scream that for me." Her best friend can be heard muttering an annoyed "Excuse me" on the crowded-bar track as well as on the rush-hour track; the friend's father can be heard getting into a taxi and requesting, "110th and Third Ave., please." Chavez added, "I take it very seriously when I say there are no fake New York accents on this album."

The entire album was produced in a single hectic week. Naturally, some tracks fell by the wayside. "We wanted to do a bodega so bad," Chavez said. "But that was one where we just couldn't get the energy, the insanity, of being in a bodega." Worse, she feared that the requisite bodega cat would come off sounding like a "Muppet cat." According to Welch, copyright issues were another obstacle. One victim: the notoriously singsongy Mister Softee truck jingle, which had to be expunged from the side-street track. "That's a sound we're all familiar with," she said. "I can't say I love it, but I kind of miss it." Well, yes. Exactly.

—*Bruce Handy*

WISH YOU WERE HERE DEPT.

RUINS

Ten years ago, the British comedians Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon went on a culinary tour of northern England, which the director Michael Winterbottom filmed as both a BBC miniseries and a movie, called "The Trip." Coogan (English, undermining) and Brydon (Welsh, eager) played themselves, only pettier, dining at Michelin-starred restaurants and competing over Michael Caine impersonations. More trips, and films, followed—to Italy and Spain. The final installment, "The Trip to Greece," out on demand this week, finds the duo eating their way through Lesbos, Athens, and Hydra, and it may have to substitute for your cancelled summer vacation—if you don't mind tagging along with two passive-aggressive middle-aged comedians.

The other day, the pair caught up over Zoom. Both were self-isolating at home, Coogan in Sussex and Brydon in Twickenham, about fifty miles apart. ("And that feels right," Brydon said.) Coogan was in his office, his hair grown to a salt-and-pepper shag, and Brydon sat in his kitchen, in front of a fridge covered with photographs. He held one up, of him with Bruce Springsteen. "Rob is very keen on Bruce Springsteen, and I'm happy to share that enthusiasm by proxy," Coogan said.

"When we were doing 'The Trip to Greece,' I was playing him 'Western Stars,' the new album, in the car," Brydon said. "He came to admire it. I would go so far as to say he loved it. At the end, I presented him with it in vinyl."

"I have it in this very room," Coogan said. "It's over there, behind something." He disappeared for a moment and returned with the album, still in plastic wrap.

"Unopened," Brydon observed.

"It's all about the anticipation, isn't it?"

To re-create their shared dining adventures, both had received an identical delivery of Grecian snacks: pita, feta, olives, dried oregano. Brydon drank a glass of rosé. He had been spending his quarantine tending to his garden and watching old movies, while Coogan had been filling his hours with Skype screenwriting sessions. Neither man's palate had suffered; Brydon's wife, Clare, loves to cook, as does Coogan's twenty-three-year-old daughter, also named Clare. "So, for both of us, *Clare* is taking *care* of the *food*, and that is *good*," Brydon said.

Coogan winced at the slant rhyme. "If my daughter wasn't here," he said, "I would probably buy a very high-end precooked thing, like a fish pie, and then steam my own broccoli and pretend that I've made a meal."

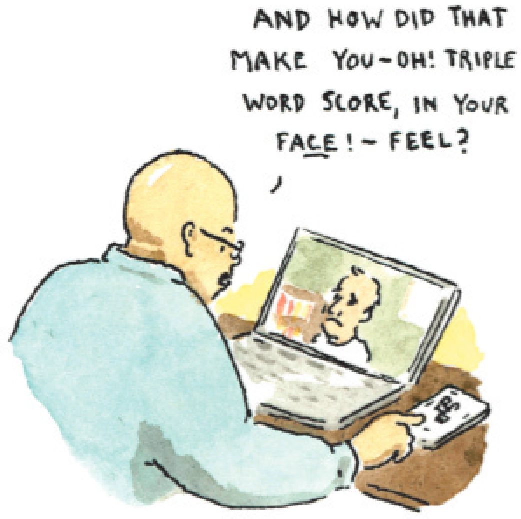
"When you say 'steam your own broccoli,' it reminds me of when we were at that beach resort in Greece," Brydon said. "And that rather lugubrious-looking waiter came over and told us what he had, and at the end he said, 'And I have two soft lobsters.'"

"No, he didn't," Coogan countered. "He said, 'And I have two *flat* lobsters.' And

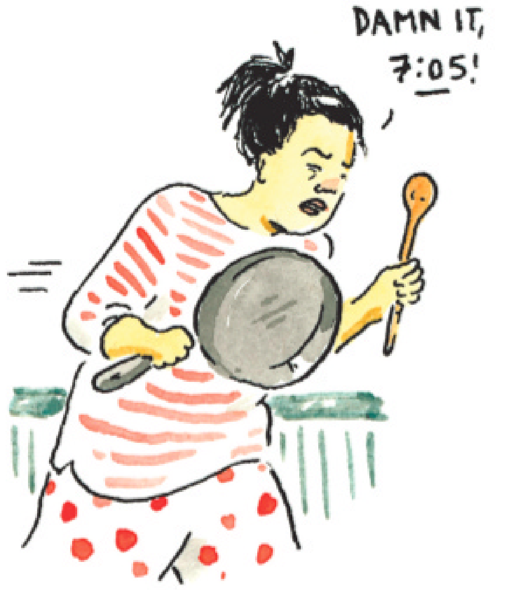
SKETCHPAD BY EMILY FLAKE

QUARANTINE HALL OF SHAME

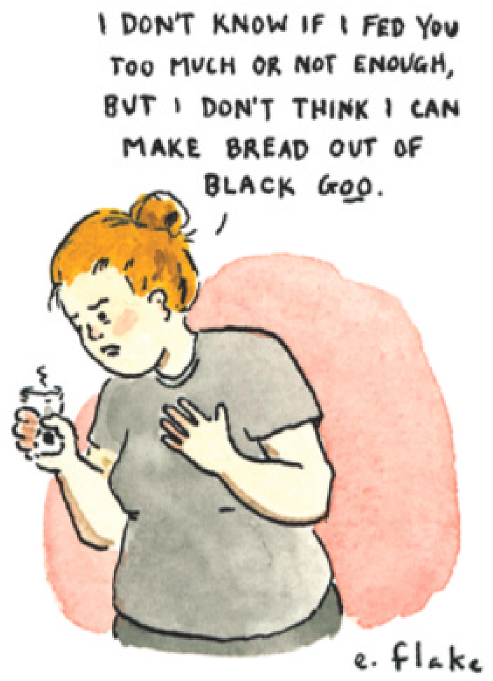
PLAYED "WORDS WITH FRIENDS" THROUGH AN ENTIRE ZOOM THERAPY SESSION WITH A PAYING CLIENT


AND HOW DID THAT MAKE YOU—OH! TRIPLE WORD SCORE, IN YOUR FACE!—FEEL?

CHRONICALLY LATE TO 7 P.M. THANK-YOU NOISEMAKING



MURDERED A SOURDOUGH STARTER


I DON'T KNOW IF I FED YOU TOO MUCH OR NOT ENOUGH, BUT I DON'T THINK I CAN MAKE BREAD OUT OF BLACK GOO.
e. flake

Rob said, 'I'm very sorry to hear that.'"

Brydon wagged a finger. "What I said was, 'Oh, I'm *sorry*.'"

"That's right," Coogan conceded. "It was said with sympathy. Very pure malapropistic comedy. 'Malapropistic'? That's got to be a word. It's timeless comedy, because it ultimately doesn't mean anything, and therefore it's sort of liberating."

In Greece, they visited the Temple of Apollo at Delphi and other ruins, where Coogan expounded on Greek philosophy. "I have a greater and deeper knowledge of 'Grease' the movie than he does," Brydon said.

"I'd happily admit that," Coogan said, and returned his thoughts to the ancients: "Aristotle, Socrates."

"Olivia Newton-John, John Travolta."

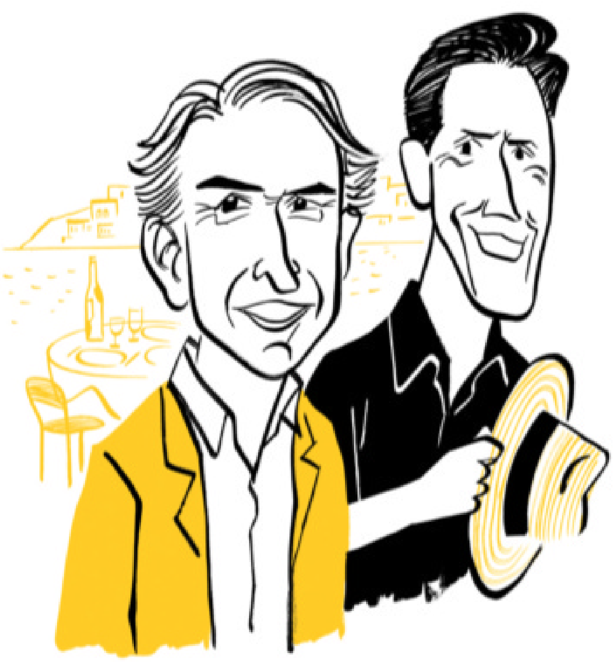
"Aristotle talks about striving for excellence," Coogan said. "It was a noble human pursuit, just to perfect whatever it is you do."

"The title song from 'Grease' wasn't in the original stage production," Brydon offered, nibbling on feta. "Frankie Valli, of course. It was written by Barry Gibb, specifically for the film."

"Yeah," Coogan said. "It's important in comedy not to duplicate skill sets." Did they have a favorite Greek god? "Zeus," Coogan answered, "because he is flawed."

"Does he remind you of anyone?" Brydon prodded.

"You're not going to lure me into comparing myself to a god," Coogan said. "But, if you put a gun to my head and said, 'Which kind of god do you identify with, Steve?,' I'd say, 'Not the Christian one.'" Brydon was struggling with some pistachio shells. "Don't your nails start to get sore pulling them apart?" Coogan asked.



Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon

"It's all about technique," Brydon said. "You've got to know where on the shell to apply the pressure. It's a bit like life."

"So you *are* really into philosophy, just not Greek philosophy," Coogan said, not quite impressed. "You're into pistachio philosophy." Brydon, pleased with his progress, displayed his bowl of nuts.

—*Michael Schulman*

DEPT. OF ESSENTIAL WORK

GREEN

"In here, if they don't have people caring for them every day, three hundred sixty-five days a year, they'll die," Todd Forrest said. He was referring not to I.C.U. patients but to the delicate cuttings and plants in the Nolen Greenhouses at the New York Botanical Garden, where he has been the head of horticulture since 2004. "As we triage and allocate resources, the time has to go to the plants that need the most care," he said, and headed for the tropics.

Inside one of the glass buildings, a skeleton staff was misting orchids and tropical specimens. "The first priority is always watering," Forrest said through a bandanna that he had tied around his face, bank-robber style. Normally, watering occurs in the conservatory in a mad rush between 8 A.M. and 10 A.M., before the garden opens to the public. But since March 15th, when the Botanical Garden closed to visitors (this has been the longest closure in its hundred-and-thirty-year history), a third of the staff members have worked in shifts—socially distant from one another, but intimate with every plant. An automated sprinkler system would never do. "The plants all have slightly different needs," Forrest said. He had worried, at first, whether his team would be deemed "essential" enough to continue working through the pandemic. But, even before Governor Andrew Cuomo added horticultural maintenance to New York's list of indispensable jobs, many Botanical Garden employees already met the criteria for essential workers. "Because we are curating an irreplaceable museum," Forrest said, "in our case, of plants."

The garden stretches across two hundred and fifty acres, and Forrest uses a golf cart to make his rounds. He whizzed past the Stone Mill, a structure from 1840 that normally would be rented out for spring weddings, and a stand of white birches that looked almost Scandinavian against the steel-gray sky. When he got to the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory, a horticulturist named Jennifer Henry waved at him as she misted plants. Henry, who wore rubber boots and a surgical mask, said that her husband and kids don't worry about her coming in to work. "But my mom and dad, in Ottawa, that's another story. They see me as being in the epicenter." She had been enjoying the chance to commune with the plants privately. "It feels like our own little palace right now," she said. At this time of year, the garden can get up to ten thousand visitors a day.

Back in his cart, Forrest zoomed onward, to Daffodil Hill, which was first planted in the nineteen-twenties. "Relatively few of the original bulbs remain," he said. "There's always something that upsets the plans of even the most knowledgeable and dedicated gardener—there's always some drought or some deluge or some insect." Just as he was climbing off his cart, the sun came out from behind the clouds, and the sky was transformed from spooky gray to jubilant blue. It was like the moment in "The Wizard of Oz" when the film switches to Technicolor: the rolling landscape was animated by brilliant hues—the reddish haze of crab-apple trees in the distance, green grass paths snaking up the hillside. In every direction, daffodils glowed in the light.

Since 2015, the staff has been planting a hundred thousand daffodil bulbs every fall. "We want to reach a million," Forrest said. "We create these pathways so people won't walk on the daffodils—and then they walk on them anyway." He shook his head. "Those of us who work in public gardens, we always have a love-hate relationship with the public. They pick flowers and they climb trees, and we get exasperated. But what has really struck home for me since the pandemic started is how we exist *only* for the public. I love plants more than people, but you realize that the life of

Todd Forrest

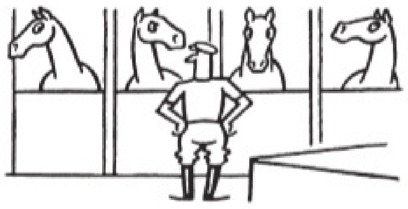
the garden is as much about the visitors who come to it as the plants we grow.”

Forrest was a philosophy major at Wesleyan before he did graduate work in horticulture. “This notion that we’re ‘essential’ is based on what we provide for people,” he said. “Those of us who are able to work right now are grateful that we have jobs, and that we’re well enough to do them, especially in such a special and beautiful place. The payback on that is, Let’s do everything we can to make sure that the garden does what it needs to do whenever people are able to return to it. We want the garden to be an escape, and not a reminder of what was lost.”

—*Ariel Levy*

THE SPORTING SCENE

LAYING ODDS



Some of those who are missing sports right now are turning to a miracle cure, as scientifically proven as hydroxychloroquine. This sport is live on TV every day, featuring athletes who go all out, regardless of who is watching. Actually, the athletes couldn’t care less. “I’m watching horses right now,” Shecky Greene, the nonagenarian comedian, said the other day, over the phone. “Oaklawn, Tampa Bay, Gulfstream.” These are racetracks—in Arkansas and Florida—that are closed to fans but not to horses, jockeys, and backstretch workers. In March, when the N.B.A., the N.H.L., and M.L.B. postponed their seasons, state horse-racing bodies asserted a kind of equine exception: the races not only could go on without the public but *should* go on—if only for the health of the horses, who, unlike LeBron James, can’t work out on their own.

At Oaklawn, whose spring meet just ended, the staff was sanitizing the starting gate between races, and the jockeys’ “hot box,” the sauna where riders sweat down to their allotted weight before a race, had been closed. Meanwhile, the coronavirus has shown up at Aqueduct, in Queens. And Golden Gate Fields, in the Bay Area, was shut down by the health inspector. (It reopened last week.) The Kentucky Derby, in Louisville, was moved from early May to September 5th, the first such postponement since 1945. Horseplayers have now become acquainted with a place called Fonner Park, in Grand Island, Nebraska.

In Nevada, where casinos have been closed since March 18th, Greene, the onetime Rat Pack-adjacent tummler-raconteur of Las Vegas night-club comedy, who once commanded a hundred thousand dollars a week playing the big hotels, was under quarantine only in the sense that he couldn’t drive the short distance from his home to the race and sports book at the Green Valley Ranch Resort Spa & Casino. He could bet online, but he finds that avenue to be nothing but trouble, and was content placing two-dollar win bets in his mind. “I’m ninety-four—you don’t care if you miss betting a horse,” he said. “I bet 8–5 that I wake up breathing.”

TVG, the horse-racing channel, was on in the background. In 1973, a front-running horse named Shecky Greene went off at 6–1 in the Kentucky Derby and held the lead for seven furlongs, only to be left in the dust by the Triple Crown legend Secretariat. “He took the lead for almost a mile,” Shecky Greene (the person) said. Then Secretariat passed him, “like he was standing still.” Shecky Greene (the horse) was owned by Joe Kellman, a Chicago businessman and a friend of Buddy Hackett.

Greene said that he liked the seven horse, Ever Smart, in the seventh race at Tampa Bay Downs. It was a lower-level, twenty-thousand-dollar race for three-year-old fillies. Despite federal indictments against the racing industry alleging horse doping—not to mention the plague of animal deaths at Santa Anita Park, in California—the TV racing hosts have been adapting their broadcasts, with helpful tips for newcomers.

“My father took me to the racetrack when I was six, seven years old,” Greene said. “He was a degenerate. In Chicago. My father was a salesman, and he used to carry heavy suitcases with shoes in them.” At the track, “he once sat next to Capone, and Capone gave him a horse.” Naturally, the horse won. “Well, sure, because Capone bet on it. They shot the other eight horses before they finished the race.”

Last month, the mayor of Las Vegas appeared on CNN and seemed to tell Anderson Cooper that she would offer up her city as a “control group” for the pandemic-liberation crowd. Greene was less sanguine. “People think this is going to be over soon. This is not going to be over soon,” he said. “I think it’s going to be a long time. I don’t think I may see the end of this.”

The race at Tampa went off, and Ever Smart broke to the lead, besting the field through the first turn and down the backstretch. “He’s got a nice lead, he’s 12–1,” Greene said. His wife, Marie Musso, the daughter of the jazz saxophonist Vido Musso, who roomed with Frank Sinatra as part of Tommy Dorsey’s band, wanted to know whom Greene was talking to. “She allows me ten minutes on the phone,” he said. “And I can sing for ten minutes.”

In the 2015 book “The Comedians,” Kliph Nesteroff wrote, of Greene, “He was a creature of the nightclub—flying off on wild tangents, climbing walls, and fighting owners. It was a free-form approach to comedy that a five-minute television spot could not convey.” Later in life, he stopped performing and announced that he had bipolar disorder.

Ever Smart was still leading as the pack turned for home. “He’s pulling away very nice. Oh, my God, he’s gonna win,” Greene said. But Ever Smart was caught near the wire and finished second. Greene began probing a Rainbow Pick 6 situation at Gulfstream. “I have never really stayed in the house this long,” he observed. “Once, when I was arrested, but not this long.”

—*Paul Brownfield*

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

COMPASSIONATE RELEASE

Will the pandemic make us rethink mass incarceration?

BY SARAH STILLMAN

Arrested during the crisis, Roslyn Crouch feared she wouldn't leave jail alive.

On March 14th, Roslyn Crouch, a mother of twelve, left her house in New Orleans to stock up on toilet paper and canned goods, and didn't return. Crouch, who is forty-two, with slender braids down to her knees, had been feeling anxious about the spread of the coronavirus. At home, she cared for her elderly mother, and for a half-dozen children, including a son with sickle-cell anemia, a blood disorder. She herself had chronic bronchitis, and worried that it put her at risk. Many people in her neighborhood lacked access to high-quality medical care. (Black residents of Louisiana have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic; they make up about thirty per cent of the state's population, but account for almost sixty per cent of documented deaths from the virus.) She thought, This is some serious stuff. After scrolling through a few too many coronavirus stories on her phone that Saturday morning, she got dressed, spritzed herself with her favorite perfume, A Thousand Wishes, and drove to a dollar store with her two-year-old son, Kyi, to buy shelter-in-place supplies.

On the way, Crouch failed to stop at a stop sign in Jefferson Parish and was pulled over by the police. She was then arrested for a string of petty crimes, including driving without proper registration and with a stolen license plate that police valued at twenty-five dollars. The most serious charge resulted from a nine-year-old warrant for possession of marijuana. As Crouch was put in the back of a police car, with Kyi, she pleaded with the arresting officers to call her daughter Tae, who worked as a security guard. Tae sped across the Mississippi River, arriving just in time to pry her sobbing little brother from the police car and prevent him from being turned over to child-protective services. "I call him Hip Baby, because he's attached to my mom's hip," Tae told me. She took Kyi home, but it was "hell on earth trying to tame him without her." The cops drove Crouch to the Jefferson Parish jail.

In late March, Governor John Bel Edwards announced that Louisiana had the fastest-growing coronavirus infection rate in the world. According to state reports at the end of last year, Louisiana also had the highest incarceration rate in the country. The pandemic posed an immediate threat in the state's jails, where cells are crowded and poorly sanitized, and people frequently cycle in and out of custody. Since 2013, the main jail in Orleans Parish has been under a consent decree for what the Department of Justice called "dangerous and unacceptable" conditions, including "inadequate medical care." Prisons, too, present a contagion risk; they have less rapid turnover than jails, but staff come and go, and large populations and underfunded health services make outbreaks hard to contain. Ben Smith, who served thirteen years in the Louisiana State Penitentiary, commonly known as Angola, remembers how quickly infections passed through the prison each year. Lacking accessible treatment, men devised remedies using instant soup, garlic, oranges, and peppermint leaves. Smith—who now works for the First 72+, a nonprofit that helps people adjust to life after incarceration—worried about his friends who were still inside, among them an older man with Stage IV colon cancer who was nearing parole. "Imagine a prisoner serving a life sentence, with age on him. If he got the virus, would they choose to give him a ventilator?" Smith asked. "It's a very, very contagious virus.

PHOTOGRAPH BY WILLIAM WIDMER

Now you could be sentenced to death."

At the Jefferson Parish jail, Crouch shared an intake cell with four other women. There were mats on the floor, for sleeping, and the only source of drinking water was a faucet above a toilet without a lid, where some of Crouch's cellmates, apparently detoxing from drugs, spent the night vomiting. She draped an extra sleeping mat over her body, hoping that it would shield her from germs, but a guard chastised her—one person, one mat, she was told. Crouch asked the guards, "Y'all sure those ladies don't have the virus?" By the time she reached Tae on the jailhouse phone, she was crying. She told her daughter, "I've got to get out of here before this virus gets me."

For decades, community groups have pointed out the social costs of mass incarceration: its failure to address the root causes of addiction and violence; its steep fiscal price tag; its deepening of racial inequalities. The coronavirus pandemic has exposed another danger of the system: its public-health risks. In April, the American Civil Liberties Union worked with epidemiologists and statisticians to show that, without protective measures in jails and prisons, including rapid reductions in incarcerated populations, the virus could kill an additional hundred thousand Americans. Families of the incarcerated—along with national legal organizations, grassroots groups, and religious leaders—began to push for mass releases, focussing on defendants arrested for nonviolent offenses, those nearing the ends of their sentences, and the medically vulnerable. In Philadelphia, outside the Criminal Justice Center, protesters lined up coffins to mark the coronavirus-related death of a woman who had been eligible to be released in a few months. In Columbus, Ohio, they wore masks reading "20K by May," the number of releases they were demanding. A team based at U.C.L.A.'s law school started a spreadsheet to track such actions, calling itself the Covid-19 Behind Bars Data Project. By mid-May, it had tallied more than five hundred legal filings and court orders, along with dozens of protests.

Some efforts accomplished in weeks or months what activists had been working toward for decades, leading to large experiments in decarceration. Since mid-March, San Francisco has reduced its jail population by nearly forty per cent, and California has made plans to release thousands of people from state prisons. In New Jersey, the State Supreme Court authorized the release of as many as a thousand detainees from county jails. Each week in April, the federal-prison population declined by around a thousand people; by May, it had reached its lowest level in two decades. In dozens of cities, cops were ordered to make fewer arrests, district attorneys dropped low-level charges, and judges vacated bench warrants for unpaid fines and other minor infractions. "Advocates on the ground have been challenging mass incarceration for so long—and now much of what we've been calling for, pre-COVID-19, we're seeing it transpire," Patrisse Cullors, the co-founder of Black Lives Matter, told me, from Los Angeles, where she's been organizing for releases with Reform L.A. Jails. "At the local, state, and national level, this is a moment when we can collectively transform how our country relates to the most vulnerable."

One early push occurred in Santa Clara County, California, where the country's first coronavirus deaths were recorded. Raj Jayadev runs Silicon Valley De-Bug, a grassroots group that helps incarcerated people devise creative strategies to fight their cases. Some eighty per cent of people in the county jail are awaiting trial, often because they can't afford bail. At weekly De-Bug meetings, families put together "social biography packets," stuffed with personal photos, letters, and eight-to-ten-minute videos, to present a fuller picture of defendants. In mid-March, as the virus spread, Jayadev worked with Carson White, an attorney with the public defender's office, who compiled a list of people seeking release from the county jail. White negotiated with prosecutors, the sheriff's office, and pretrial services, and an agreement was reached to shrink the jail's population by twenty per cent. On March 19th, the county released an initial group of about a hundred and fifty people. Since then, the jail's population has been reduced by more than a thousand. "This moment has flipped the script on mass incarceration," White told me. "It's laid bare that caging huge swaths of our society isn't necessary—it's just convenient."

Even after mass releases began, Jayadev feared that many defendants were being "left off the rescue boat," particularly those charged with felonies. "Just because someone has been accused of a crime with a higher bail schedule doesn't mean they deserve a potential death sentence," he said. With court systems shutting down because of the pandemic, it was harder to advocate for defendants. "I don't even have access to my clients right now—that whole system is out the window," White told me, in March. Normally, she could bring a defendant before a judge within two days of filing a motion; now a client's only chance for release was a prosecutor's mercy. (In April, the county court in Santa Clara began hearing a limited number of cases, with a focus on defendants with a strong likelihood of release.) Many clients had agreed to attend drug-treatment or mental-health programs as a condition of their release, but the programs had been suspended. White had a ninety-one-year-old client with dementia who had been arrested following an outburst in his home; he was being held in the jail's infirmary with at least one coronavirus patient. "My in-box is full of heartbreaking e-mails from community members asking if our office can help release their sister with asthma, their father with emphysema, their fiancé awaiting a lung biopsy," she told me.

Jayadev was working with Johnny Page, who was being held in the Elmwood Correctional Complex, in Milpitas, California, awaiting trial on drug charges. "He has Type 2 diabetes and he's not taking his insulin shots," Rebecca Rivera, the mother of his child, told me; several sheriff's deputies had tested positive for COVID-19, and Page refused to enter the common area of the jail, where medical staff administered the shots, because he'd noticed unsanitary practices there. "My son keeps asking, 'Is Dad O.K.?'" she said. Page called her daily, with updates: men were shackled in dirty chains; they slept in bunk beds a few feet apart. Rivera jotted down notes—"The inmates are starving as they have not been allowed canteen for two weeks"—and urged Page to organize.

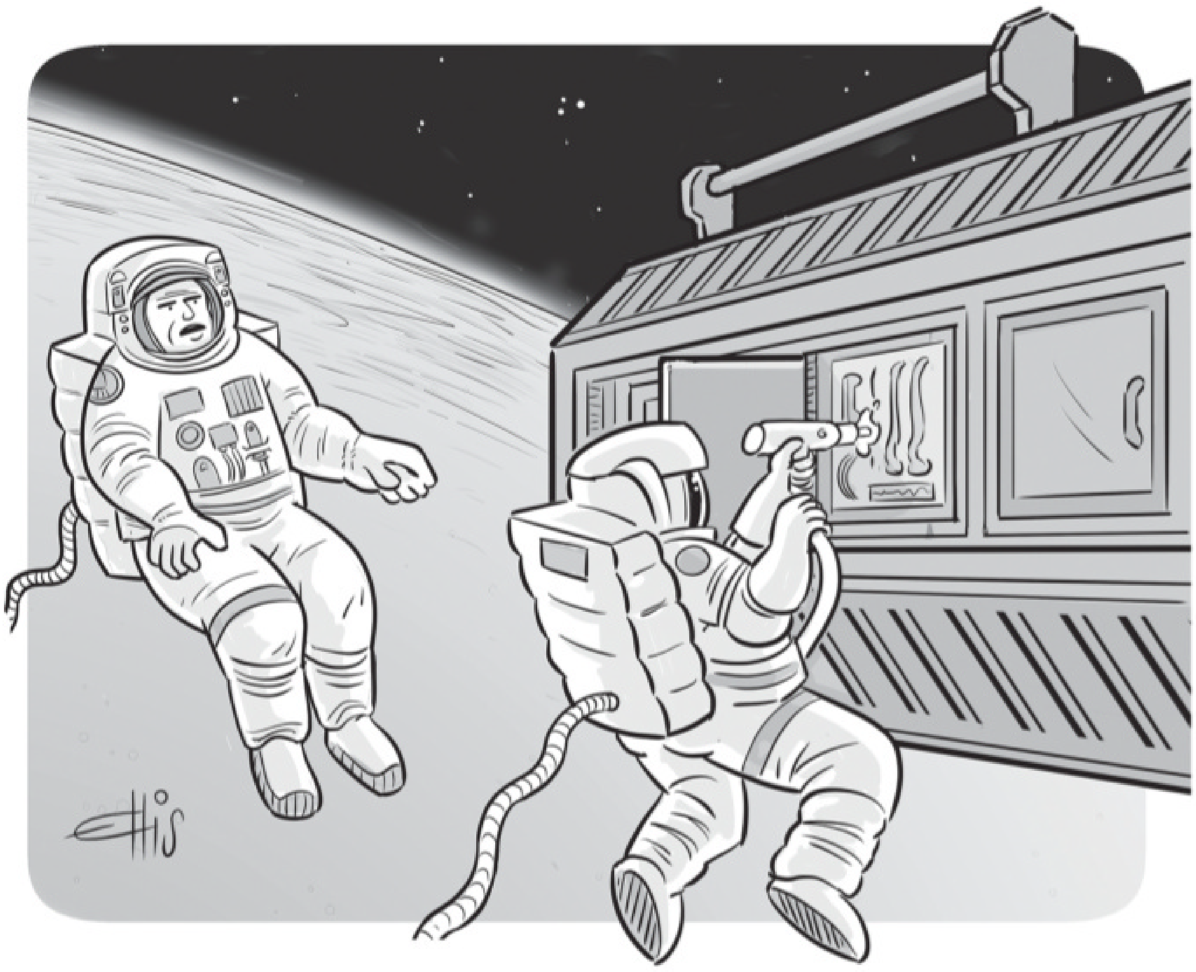
In late March, I spoke with Page on the phone. He and other men on his cellblock had drawn up a list of fifteen grievances. Since COVID-19 hit, the commissary had shut down, and the men could no longer buy meals, soap, Tylenol, or stamps and stationery to communicate with their families. (The phone service at the jail is run by a private company that charges steep fees.) Food was being delivered by people who had touched potentially contaminated surfaces. He asked if he could read me a statement. "We, the inmates in this county jail, want the public to know that we are human," he said. "We are undergoing treatment that is inhumane and unjust." Without swift depopulation of the jail and other protective measures, he went on, "the virus will spread like a California wildfire." In the weeks that followed, officials instituted reforms, which included distributing masks and agreeing to a health inspection. On April 18th, after California temporarily suspended cash bail for those charged with most misdemeanors and nonviolent felonies, Page was released. He is now working with Silicon Valley De-Bug to help people still trapped in jails. "By far, the most effective driver of change right now has come directly from those locked up, on the inside," Jayadev said. "Their voices, their demands for survival."

On March 16th, at Crouch's red brick home in New Orleans, where pink azaleas were on the verge of blooming, Tae managed to rustle up the money for her mother's bail—nearly four thousand dollars. Crouch would be free by dinnertime; she could watch Lifetime that evening, curled up with her kids. But Crouch called her daughter in the afternoon. "I'm not getting out," she said. She was being transferred to the jail in Orleans Parish, a neighboring jurisdiction, for reasons she didn't understand. "I don't even know why I'm here anymore," she said. Tae promised to investigate, but, when she called officials at the jail and other authorities, "all I got was closed doors and brick walls."

Even by mid-March, as infection rates began to soar, Orleans Parish resisted public pressure to reduce its jail population. Police officers continued to make arrests for nonviolent crimes, including graffiti, failure to return a rental car, and obstructing sidewalks. In bail hearings, when public defenders raised the threat of COVID-19, the district attorney's office accused them of trying to "exploit" the coronavirus to benefit their clients. "This is hardly a time to encourage lawlessness," the D.A.'s spokesperson told the press. Prosecutors opposed some bond reductions, especially for defendants without a home address, arguing that, if they were released, they would "pose a threat to the general public by potentially spreading the virus to others." This logic was pernicious; according to an open letter written by the dean of Tulane's public-health school and other experts, the longer the parish delayed releases, the more genuine the threat of mass infection in the jail was—and thus the more likely it would be to spread to the public. (The D.A.'s office said that it has instructed prosecutors to stop making this argument in bond hearings.)

As coronavirus cases mounted in Louisiana, incarcerated people often had no access to their lawyers. At several juvenile-detention centers, minors were kept in lockdown or solitary confinement, ostensibly for their protection. The mother of a sixteen-year-old boy detained in northern Louisiana told me, in April, that the facility did not respond to her e-mails and calls. "It's been a whole month, and I don't know if my child is dead or alive, sick or healthy," she said. Another woman reached out to Voice of the Experienced (VOTE), a local nonprofit, for help in finding her mother, who had tested positive for COVID-19 in a state prison and then been shuffled to an unknown location, where her lawyer couldn't contact her. "WHERE IS MY MOTHER!!!??? IS SHE OK!?" she wrote, in a note that VOTE posted on social media. "That's all we want to know. That's it. Let me hear her voice! Anything!!!"

Tae worried about her mother's transfer to Orleans Parish, and eventually got in touch with Thomas Frampton, a public-interest lawyer and a lecturer at Harvard Law School. Ordinarily, Frampton would have been on campus, teaching Legal Research and Writing to first-year students. But his class now met on Zoom, and he was in New Orleans, where he lives part time. Frampton started looking through court records and found that Crouch had a four-year-old material-witness warrant out for her arrest in Orleans Parish.



"I didn't come all this way to do work."

Material-witness warrants allow law enforcement to arrest and jail someone who hasn't been accused of a crime—and may even be the victim of the crime in question—in order to insure her testimony. At the time, the Orleans Parish D.A., Leon Cannizzaro, routinely jailed domestic-violence and sexual-assault survivors as material witnesses, to secure their testimony against their alleged abusers. (In 2017, the A.C.L.U. and Civil Rights Corps sued the D.A.'s office over the practice, and the case is pending in federal district court.) Frampton found that, in 2016, an Orleans Parish prosecutor had requested a material-witness warrant for Crouch, to compel her testimony in the trial of a man accused of shooting one of her friends. The defendant was acquitted, rendering the warrant moot. Still, the D.A.'s office pressed a judge to keep it open. (A spokesperson told me that the warrant was the result of a "clerical error"; the prosecutor had intended to request a contempt-of-court warrant, which is more commonly held open after a trial.)

Instead of setting Crouch free, deputies at the Jefferson Parish sheriff's office detained her for two more nights, then sent her to the Orleans Parish jail, called the Justice Center. Frampton worried that, with the courts closed, securing Crouch's release could prove unusually complicated. Her bond had been set at a hundred thousand dollars. On March 19th, Frampton visited her at the jail. By the time he arrived, she'd fallen ill: her body ached and she had a bad cough. Hand sanitizer is banned in many jails and prisons. (Administrators argue that inmates will drink it, or use it to start fires.) Frampton stuffed an antiseptic wipe through an opening in the glass divider so that Crouch could disinfect her hands after wiping her runny nose.

Activists were heartened by the initial wave of mass releases this spring. But optimism gave way, for some families, to panic and indignation, as many facilities delayed reducing their populations and instituting safeguards, and coronavirus outbreaks began. At the end of March, by the time New York City released some six hundred and fifty people from Rikers Island, its main jail, the infection rate there was already seven times higher than in the city's general population. The jail's chief physician called it "a crisis of a magnitude no generation living today has ever seen." In Chicago, the Cook County Jail, which is fighting a judge's social-distancing order, has now recorded nine hundred cases among detainees and staff, and ten deaths. Detained men held strikes to protest the lack of safety precautions, and placed handmade signs in their windows reading "Help us, don't let us die."

For those in New Orleans, the pandemic brought to mind how, in 2005, Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Orleans Parish jail. As the storm descended, many staff members fled, leaving behind some sixty-five hundred people—including minors—locked up without food, water, or ventilation. Gina Womack, who runs Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children, told me, "People in prisons, especially kids, were an afterthought." Although there was no official death count after the storm, Human Rights Watch later reported that more than five hundred incarcerated people were not accounted for; many who survived described beatings by staff and cellmates, and infections from contaminated floodwaters. According to a report by the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana, when detained children were finally evacuated, a few days later, on floating mattresses, some were so hungry that they tried to scoop up bits of food drifting by in the water. ("One boy found some dog snacks," the report read.) In the storm's aftermath, Womack felt that the city "never took the necessary steps to divest from prisons, and invest in our children and our communities." As a result, when COVID-19 arrived, people in the Orleans Parish jail were "sitting ducks."

Along with other activists, Womack attended Zoom strategy sessions to discuss mass releases, and encouraged parents with incarcerated children to call politicians and the press. The Orleans Parish Prison Reform Coalition sent more than three hundred letters to elected officials. "This virus may not be as visible as floodwaters, but it's just as deadly," Sade Dumas, who runs the group, said. The city initially resisted, but, on March 26th, the sheriff sent a letter to criminal-court judges, asking them to "give consideration to releases, even on a temporary basis, of any non-violent individuals without a prior criminal history." The D.A. also stopped opposing most bond reductions and releases. By the last week of March, the Orleans Parish jail population had dropped by nearly a quarter, to below eight hundred, its lowest level in decades. The D.A.'s office wrote to me that "only a tiny fraction of those still inside have been jailed for non-violent offenses." This was a remarkable shift, one that Frampton had assured me wouldn't happen "until hell froze over."

The Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, meanwhile, set up a panel that would review the cases of certain people in state prisons seeking temporary release. Frampton took on the case of Candice Bowie, who contracted COVID-19 in Louisiana's Elayn Hunt Correctional Center, in April, when she was eight months pregnant. Some eighty-five per cent of the women at the prison had tested positive for the virus, and two inmates in her housing block had died. She was scheduled to give birth by C-section. Frampton successfully lobbied for her release. On May 4th, he and Kelly Orians, who works for the First 72+, the organization that eases reëntry into society, filled a rental car with balloons, created a makeshift divider out of duct tape and a plastic tarp, and drove to pick Bowie up. (When they arrived, the guard mistook them for morticians.) On her way to the hospital to deliver her son, the next day, Bowie called me. "I didn't want to give birth with a prison guard beside me, but I'd mentally prepared to harden my heart to it," she said. "Now I'm excited . . . I wasn't trying to die in there!"

Kisha Edwards, who works for the First 72+, told me that those who are released still face circumstances that are "surreal and devastating." Jobs, especially for those with criminal records, are almost nonexistent. To receive food stamps, you need an I.D., but the office that issues such documents is closed. Many homeless shelters, which often house the newly released, are also closed. Edwards had a client who was let out after ten years in prison but whose mother was hesitant to take him in, for fear of infection. He found a job with a small business, but got laid off soon afterward because of the shutdown. "So now he's homeless," she said. Released parents face additional hurdles. "Mothers want to be reunited with their kids," Edwards said. "But if they can't get a job that means they can't get a place to live, which means they can't get their kids back."

Many people risk ending up on the streets. Steven Berrier, a sixty-year-old man who served thirty-five years in prison, was released late one night in mid-April, with a pair of prison jeans, a blue shirt, and sneakers a half-size too small. "I had eleven dollars and a bus ticket," he told me. With no family to take him in, he spent the first night sleeping on a bus-stop bench. A few days later, he found out about the First 72+. Edwards took him to Walmart and bought him some new clothes, a cell phone (which made him feel like a "baby with a new toy"), and a face mask. He's been self-quarantining in a hotel room outside of New Orleans that the group rented for him for two months. "To have assistance and a helping hand, that's really something special," he said. Still, some nights he lies in bed worrying about what will happen when his time there runs out. "Nobody's hiring in this pandemic, and you can't mingle or meet people, so I'm lost out here," he told me. "I just want to earn an honest living, and have a roof over my head—those aren't wants, those are needs," he said. "People have killed themselves over things like this."

When Thomas Frampton visited Crouch at the Orleans Parish jail, he confronted an officer, pointing out that the warrant on which she was being held was four years old and, he believed, illegitimate. "I absolutely created a scene," he told me. A sheriff's deputy called a judge, who agreed that Crouch should be released. "That's a lesson of the moment—that people are seeing the urgency, and that a whole range of actors stepped up to insure Ms. Crouch's release," Frampton said. Shortly after 5 P.M. on March 19th, Crouch walked out of the jail and asked a stranger if she could borrow her cell phone to call her family. "My kids started to cry when I got home," Crouch told me. "I made them baked macaroni and barbecued chicken."

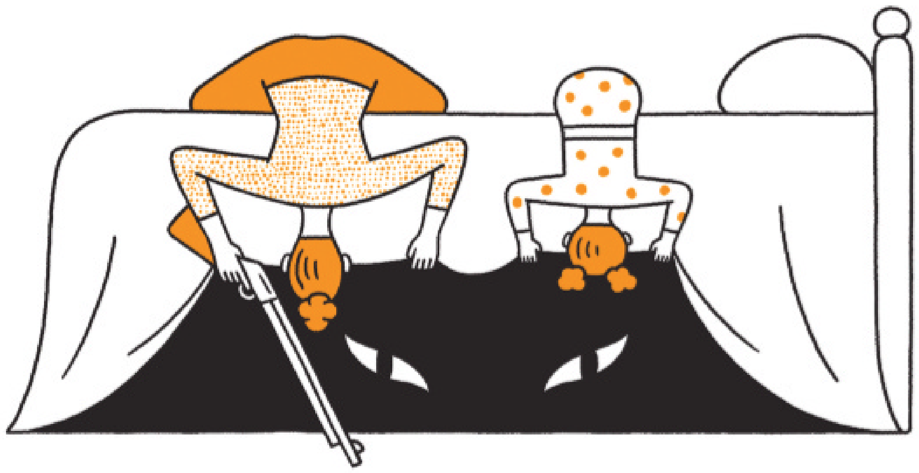
Crouch felt lucky to be free. But she had grown sicker: her aches and shivers had increased, and she had lost her sense of smell. A few days after her release, she found out about a local drive-through clinic that did COVID-19 testing, but to get a test one had to have a state-issued I.D. Her arresting officers had confiscated hers and forgotten to return it. Her daughter Tae drove her there anyway, and they waited for an hour, but Crouch was not able to obtain a test. At home, she tried to self-quarantine in her bedroom. She quickly realized that, when you care for young children and an elderly parent in a small house, "it's not happening." The week after Crouch's release, she told me that her toddler had a fever. "So my baby's sick, and I don't want my mama to get sick," she said.

When she was released, the parish jail was still full of people who couldn't afford bail. At the end of March, according to the Orleans Public Defenders, more than two hundred people were still being held "on felonies that are NOT crimes of violence." A month later, more than a hundred people in the jail had tested positive for COVID-19, and two sheriff's deputies had died. State and federal prisons followed a similar trajectory. In mid-May, according to the *Times*, seven of the top ten case clusters in the nation were in prisons and jails, including Marion Correctional Institution, in Ohio (2,439 cases), and the Trousdale Turner Correctional Center, in Tennessee (1,284). At Oakdale, in Louisiana, where the first federal prisoner died from COVID-19, the death toll has now reached at least eight. The A.C.L.U. unsuccessfully sued the prison, seeking the release of vulnerable people. "Imagine if someone sick with COVID-19 came into your home and sealed the doors and windows behind them," the complaint read. "That is what the Oakdale federal detention centers have just done to the over 1,800 human beings currently detained there, where a COVID-19 outbreak is rampant, social distancing is impossible, and no one detained can leave." Recently, Louisiana prison officials revealed a controversial plan: incarcerated people across the state who tested positive for COVID-19 would be transferred to units at Angola and the Allen Correctional Center, which critics worry will cause large outbreaks in those facilities.

Local organizers are ramping up their fight. The Orleans Parish Prison Reform Coalition is pressing for an agreement from police to reduce arrests. Court Watch NOLA, a watchdog group, is pushing for court proceedings, now held on Zoom, to remain accessible to the public. Bruce Reilly, at VOTE, has been encouraging his staff to use the trauma of the moment to effect lasting reforms, including an end to incarceration for people too poor to pay court fees, less zealous use of solitary confinement, and fairer parole policies. "We need to make sure that when people realize the house is on fire—when they're looking for firemen, for water, for a way out—that they know we're standing right there, ready to help," he said. Frampton has been thinking about "The Shock Doctrine," Naomi Klein's book from 2007, in which she argues that large-scale catastrophes—wars, floods, terror attacks—tend to favor "disaster capitalists," who use chaos to enact policies that serve private enterprise. He reminded me that one of Klein's case studies was New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina: in a short period of time, a range of schools, hospitals, and public-housing complexes were privatized, at the expense of the poorest residents. "The city was fundamentally remade," Frampton said. "I'm really hoping that this moment can be like 'Shock Doctrine' in reverse—a chance to build on the growing consensus that our current model for criminal justice needs to be entirely rethought, since it isn't making our communities any safer or healthier."

Roslyn Crouch has a similar hope for her city, but she wonders how many incarcerated people will die before any such changes take place. If she ever crosses paths with the Orleans Parish D.A., she knows what she will tell him. "I want to thank you for getting me out of the dog cage," she said. "But, Lord, there are other things for you to worry about right now, instead of harassing people for petty-ass shit." ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS



EVERYDAY PARENTING TIPS

BY SIMON RICH

We've all been there. The teeth are brushed, the p.j.'s are on, and the blankie is in place. You're tiptoeing out of the nursery, when suddenly you hear, "Mommy, Mommy, there's a monster under my bed!" You sigh. Looks like that new episode of "The Bachelorette" is going to have to wait. :(Lucky for you, our experts are up to the challenge!

Is it normal for my child to be afraid of monsters? Yes. If anything, it's evidence of a healthy imagination.

How do I convince my child there's no such thing as monsters? Be patient. By five, your child should understand that the monsters she's afraid of are not real.

What if the monsters she's afraid of are real? Unfortunately, this is becoming more common in the aftermath of the Great Monster Uprising that occurred earlier this year. Ever since the creatures descended from the Dark Place, their presence on Earth has become an unavoidable aspect of our daily lives. If your child is afraid of an actual, real-life monster, such as Gorgog the Annihilator or Ctharga the Eater of Souls, explain to her that, although those monsters are obviously real, the likelihood of them attacking her is only moderate.

Should I restrict my child's media access? Most parents agree it's wise to shield kids from scary content. But experts warn that it may be futile to try to stop them from seeing monsters altogether. After all, they are on page 1 of the *Times* every day, usually striking a menacing pose. Short answer: try your best.

What if my child is having nightmares? Again, this is normal. The exception is if your child has been "marked" by a monster who is using her dreams to try to form a covenant with her. Ask your child for details about her nightmare. Did the monster address her by her Christian name? Was she asked to "sign his book"? If the answer is no, reassure her it was only a dream, probably.

Should I let my child use a night-light? A night-light might seem helpful, but experts warn they can do more harm than good. Even a small light can disrupt a child's circadian rhythms and serve as a bull's-eye for the Gauntwings, who cannot hear or smell, and hunt their prey using only their hyperdeveloped sense of sight. The only way to evade the Gauntwings is to live in total darkness.

My child is also afraid of the drain. Is that normal? I am going to assume you mean the Drain of Ga, and, yes, it's normal for her to be afraid of it. After all, it's a giant, swirling portal in the sky that looks like a screaming mouth. It's fifty times bigger than the sun. Nobody knows where it came from or what's going on with it. It's terrifying.

When my child gets upset about monsters, my husband makes jokes to try to cheer her up. Is he making the problem worse? Your husband is probably a monster. Drug him at dinner, and, when he's unconscious, strip his body naked. If he's been "husked," he will have the Mark of Corthar on his chest (see link). If he has the mark, cut off his head.

How long will this phase last? Experts agree that the Age of Monsters is just getting started. There is no end in sight. This is the "new normal."

What if I'm feeling overwhelmed? Don't beat yourself up about it. In this modern, haunted world, it's normal to occasionally feel stressed. Try to carve out some "me" time. Maybe it's a glass of wine in the bath while your daughter watches educational cartoons. Maybe it's a full bottle of gin on the roof while you scream at the monsters to "just kill me already." It's important to manage your anxiety. Otherwise, you might end up "modelling" nervous behavior for your child, which could cause her to experience stress of her own. Or maybe you should just be straight with her.

What do you mean? Maybe, when your child asks if something's wrong, tell her the truth: "Yes. Something is very wrong. Monsters are trying to kill us and the world as we know it is over."

Are you saying I should just give up? You *could* give up. Or you could fight.

What are you talking about? I'm talking about taking those monster bastards down.

Whoa. Isn't that impossible? Maybe. But isn't it worth a shot? Isn't it better than just sitting there, waiting to die?

I can't! You can.

I'm scared! I know. But you're stronger than you think. You can do this.

How? Research the monsters. Learn their weaknesses. Stockpile weapons. Strengthen your body and your mind.

And then what? When the moment comes, look your child in the eye. Tell her that the stakes are high, but you're not giving up. Tell her that you will do anything you can to protect her, and, even though it's possible you'll fail, you're going to fight for her with everything you've got. Tell her, "If these monsters think that they can fuck with my family without me shooting them first in the fucking face, they need to get their motherfucking heads examined." Watch the strength return to your child as she sees you're in no way fucking around. Listen with pride as she vows to fight the monsters by your side. Look out the window and stare down the monsters together. Dare them to fuck with your family. Dare them to fuck with the people you love. Take your child by the hand. Arm her to the teeth. Tell her you love her. Open the door. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

PROFILES

CALIFORNIA GHOSTS

Phoebe Bridgers's humor and dread.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

In late February, the singer and songwriter Phoebe Bridgers appeared at Carnegie Hall as part of a benefit for Tibet House U.S., a nonprofit founded by the composer Philip Glass, the actor Richard Gere, and the Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman. New York was not yet fully in the grip of the coronavirus pandemic, but a diffuse anxiety was nonetheless in the air. Early in the evening, the artist and musician Laurie Anderson performed several pieces from her album "Songs from the Bardo," in which she narrates sections of "The Tibetan Book of the Dead" in a gentle, steady voice. The text is intended to coax a consciousness through the foggy space between death and rebirth. Already, it felt resonant.

Bridgers, who is twenty-five, wore a tea-length black dress and high-top Doc Martens. A thin headband pushed her white-blond hair from her face. Backstage, she shared a dressing room with the seventy-four-year-old soul singer Bettye LaVette. "She's so badass," Bridgers told me later. "She was talking about a gig she'd played, and she was, like, 'Oh, what was I doing again? Oh, I was playing Obama's Inauguration.' She was flexing and it was amazing." Bridgers, who will release her second album, "Punisher," in June, gets a little jittery before she performs. "My least favorite thing is not getting nervous," she said. "Just being kind of bored and on my phone."

In 2017, Bridgers released her début album, "Stranger in the Alps." Her deft lyrics earned her comparisons to Bob Dylan—a worn-out accolade, perhaps, but there was a violent precision to Bridgers's writing that made the songs feel urgent. Shortly after the release of the single "Funeral," the singer and guitarist John Mayer tweeted, "This is the arrival of a giant." The song is about a friend's suicide. Bridgers strums an acoustic guitar. Her voice is high and feathery:

> And last night I blacked out in my car
> And I woke up in my childhood bed
> Wishing I was someone else, feeling sorry
> for myself
> When I remembered someone's kid is dead.

At Carnegie Hall, Bridgers opened her set with "Garden Song," the first single from "Punisher." I made a bootleg recording of her performance, which I have replayed several dozen times, in part because it feels like a valuable relic from an era in which large groups of people could still assemble to hear music, and in part because it is beautiful. On "Punisher," "Garden Song" is buoyed by synthesizers; it sounds lush and wet. That night, Bridgers was accompanied by her guitar and a string quartet, which added a tense elegance to a song that alludes, in an oblique way, to murdering a skinhead and burying him in the garden: "Someday I'm gonna live in your house up on the hill / And when your skinhead neighbor goes missing / I'll plant a garden in the yard then."

Conor Oberst, of Bright Eyes, was in the audience. He and Bridgers met when she was added to a bill he was part of at the Bootleg Theatre, in Los Angeles, in 2016; two years later, they made an album together, as Better Oblivion Community Center. "Right when I heard her start to sing, I felt like I was reuniting with an old friend," Oberst said, of their first encounter.

Bridgers was brought up with the music of Laurel Canyon—the nimble but vulnerable folk songs that proliferated on the West Coast in the nineteen-seventies, when writers like Joni Mitchell began exploring parallel ideas

"Here's my thing, for your emptiness," Bridgers joked, about her new album.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MATT GRUBB

of domesticity and unease—but she came of age listening to emo, a subgenre of punk rock focussed on disclosure and catharsis. Oberst is one of its most beloved practitioners. "I went *directly* into Bright Eyes as a teen-ager," Bridgers said.

Oberst and Bridgers both write frank and anxious folk songs that are preoccupied with death and spiritual decay. But Bridgers is too interested in the pliability and the beauty of language to be satisfied with mere confession. "Punisher" took Bridgers more than a year to record. "I tweak lyrics a million times," she said. "I'll listen back and be, like, 'Oh, fuck, phonetically I have something else that sounds exactly the same.'" Her best writing is both dreamlike and mundane. "The doctor put her hands over my liver/She told me my resentment's getting smaller," she sings on "Garden Song."

In conversation, Bridgers is quick to lampoon her own behavior with a withering quip, or to wisecrack about the gaffes of others, but her music can be almost unbearably tender. "Punisher" was recorded at Sound City, in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Van Nuys, where Neil Young's "After the Gold Rush," Fleetwood Mac's "Fleetwood Mac," and Nirvana's "Nevermind" were produced. There are vague echoes of all three in her music—Young's dolor, Fleetwood Mac's tunefulness, some of Nirvana's boyish rawness. Though Bridgers often jokes about her inability to behave like a normal person, "Punisher" is a fully realized work, crafted with foresight and intention.

For Bridgers's final song at Carnegie Hall, the singer Matt Berninger, of the indie-rock band the National, joined her onstage. In 2019, Berninger released "Walking on a String," a melancholy track featuring Bridgers on vocals. Bridgers and Berninger both mix humor and dread, but their age difference—Berninger is forty-nine—means that they approach the problem of getting by from different vantages. Bridgers sings worriedly of the future; Berninger sings worriedly of the past. In the end, both points of view take a toll. "I hang my head and feel the oxygen drain," they sang together. "Phoebe writes so well about boredom and sadness," Berninger told me. "Sometimes she makes those things exciting and beautiful."

The next day, Bridgers and I met for lunch at the Grand Central Oyster Bar, a century-old restaurant on the lower level of Grand Central Terminal. The ladies' rest room features a red couch shaped like a pair of lips; tall cans of aerosol hair spray are arranged by the sinks. On the first season of "Mad Men," Don Draper and Roger Sterling enjoy a bountiful Martini-and-oyster lunch at the Oyster Bar, and it remains the sort of spot where men in suits and cufflinks congregate to get loose and close deals. "Damn, this place rules," Bridgers said.

We took a table near the back. Bridgers ordered six Katama Bay oysters and a side of sautéed vegetables. "Anything else for you?" the waiter asked. She shook her head. "Anything else for you?" he asked again.

"Wow, so much fucking judgment," she said, laughing, after he walked away. When her order arrived, she felt vindicated. Surveying a plate of damp kale and green beans, she grinned and said, "This is exactly what I want! Hot, wet vegetables." Bridgers is a pescatarian, and she recalled an incident from high school in which she was mocked for her diet: "They were standing around, like, 'Phoebe's a vegetarian.' And I was, like, 'I'm a *pescatarian*.' And this girl goes, 'Phoebe, that's a fucking *religion*.'"

Bridgers has spent much of the past three years on tour, but when she's not travelling she lives alone in Silver Lake, a trendy neighborhood on the east side of Los Angeles. The singer and songwriter Elliott Smith, who died of a presumed suicide in 2003, in nearby Echo Park, is one of Bridgers's favorite musicians. Like Bridgers, Smith seemed possessed by the kind of melancholy that blossoms rather than shrinks when exposed to too much sunshine. The title track from "Punisher"—the term is a jokey pejorative that musicians use to describe the type of overzealous fan who lingers at the merch table a little too long—addresses Bridgers's deep devotion to Smith. "I wrote a song about how, if Elliott Smith were alive, I probably wouldn't have been the most fun person for him to talk to," she explained. "I'm a superfan, and I know way too much about his music. So I wrote that as if I were the punisher." The first verse is skewering:

When the speed kicks in
I go to the store for nothing
And walk right by the house where you
    lived with Snow White
I wonder if she ever thought the storybook
    tiles on the roof were too much
But from the window, it's not a bad show
If your favorite thing's "Dianetics" or stucco.

Bridgers recently started reading Joan Didion, who wrote often about California's promise and its cruelty. "Weirdly, I slept on Joan Didion until the past two years. I don't know why—I think maybe too many people mansplained why I needed to read her," she said. She described Didion as a hazy influence on "Punisher," which contains "lots of California and lots of fucking ghosts." Didion, in the essay "Notes from a Native Daughter," wrote, "All that is constant about the California of my childhood is the rate at which it disappears." On "Garden Song," Bridgers sings, "I grew up here, till it all went up in flames." Her voice is placid but resigned.

Bridgers also recently read "The Last Policeman," a sci-fi mystery novel by Ben H. Winters. "It's about a police officer," she said. "There's a meteor coming toward Earth, and everybody's gonna die, and so everybody's either killing themselves or fucking everyone they ever wanted to fuck and doing drugs. He and all his fellow-cops are kind of mailing it in. There's a thing that looks like a suicide that he thinks is a murder, and he's trying to solve the case as the world is ending." She added, "That's the way that living life feels right now." She gestured around the dining room. "We're just having lunch, you know?"

Bridgers, like many young people, feels as if she is expected to behave normally—to plan for a future, to nurture relationships—as the world around her atomizes. The absurdity of the situation requires a certain amount of disengagement. "If I woke up every morning and thought about the reality of everything, it would totally consume me," she said. "I have to think about it as if it's happening in a movie."

Bridgers was born in Los Angeles on August 17, 1994, and grew up in Pasadena. Her father built sets for film and television, and her mother, Jamie, held a series of jobs—receptionist, executive assistant—while raising Bridgers and her younger brother, Jackson. "If we'd lived anywhere else, we'd have been very solidly middle class," Bridgers said. "But in Pasadena all my friends' parents were directors or actors." Bridgers started playing guitar seriously around age thirteen, after Jamie tried to get her to learn piano. "I fucking hated being forced to do something. Reading music felt like math homework," she said. "Guitar was my rebellion."

Jamie drove her to classes at the Folk Music Center, in Claremont, and her father introduced her to the cerebral, shaggy-haired singer-songwriters who came to inform her sound. "He was pretty sensitive about money, and he didn't love it when I was taking guitar lessons," she said. "But, as far as music goes, he's the one who listened to Tom Waits, he's the one who listened to Jackson Browne."

Music became a haven, a break from having to parse her experiences. "It's intangible, which I love," she said. "What I find hard about visual art is being in a gallery thinking, Do I like this? Why don't I like this? Why do my friends like this? Am I supposed to look at this for fifteen more seconds?"

In 2009, Bridgers began attending the music program at the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts. She started dyeing her hair unnatural colors, and, later, shaving it off. She was not an especially good student—"I just didn't get far enough in school to where it was interesting," she said—but remains grateful for the vocal training that she received there. "Having to sing every day is the best thing you can do for your voice. If I'm on tour and I'm singing every single fucking night, I'm fine, weirdly," she said. "I turn into the Terminator. A zombie who can sing but not function in society."

At fifteen, Bridgers joined Sloppy Jane, an all-girl punk-rock band led by the artist Haley Dahl. Bridgers played bass and Dahl made shrieking, guttural noises, sometimes while wearing only underpants. It's worth digging up old videos of the group playing around Los Angeles. (Dahl has since relocated to New York and reimagined Sloppy Jane as an eleven-piece art ensemble.) They sound a little like early Hole, but scrappier and more dangerous; sometimes Dahl filled her mouth with paint and let it slowly dribble out. It could be hard to tell if they were satirizing art-rock clichés or doubling down on them.

After high school, Bridgers was accepted to the Berklee College of Music, in Boston, but the orientation was "heinous"—she stayed in Los Angeles. "I hit the ground running. I started playing a show every week in L.A., just trying to meet people. I think I was delusional," she said. "I was a little bit more confident than was merited at the time." One day, a talent scout saw Bridgers performing with Sloppy Jane, and she eventually scored a series of roles, most of them nonspeaking, in ads for Taco Bell, HomeGoods, Apple, and Intuit. In a 2014 iPhone commercial, she sings a rousing cover of the Pixies' "Gigantic." In a 2015 commercial for the Apple Watch, she sheepishly dismisses a notification so she can finish kissing her date goodbye. She described the experience as "minorly soul-sucking."

But the commercials bought her enough time to write and record "Stranger in the Alps." "I would have had to work at Starbucks full time to make the record that I made, and then I wouldn't have had time to make it," she said. "The fact that I was able to work five days in one year and basically gave myself my own trust fund—my rent was paid, and I could go to the studio like it was my job—gave me the freedom to explore. Which makes me think a lot of dark shit about privilege."

"Stranger in the Alps" was produced by Tony Berg. (The title is taken from the edited-for-TV version of "The Big Lebowski," in which the line "Do you see what happens when you fuck a stranger in the ass?" becomes "Do you see what happens when you find a stranger in the Alps?") Berg co-produced "Punisher" with Bridgers and Ethan Gruska, who also plays on the album. Bridgers and Berg met through a mutual acquaintance in 2014 and have been close since. "For Christmas last year, she gave me an excruciating recording of myself playing trombone," he said. "That's what I call a friend."

When "Stranger in the Alps" was finished, Bridgers got an offer from Dead Oceans, an independent label based in Bloomington, Indiana: "We forced the head of the label to come to dinner with us, because they wanted me to sign via e-mail. I'm gonna fucking sign my record contract via e-mail?" She laughed. "I printed it out. It felt really good."

When Bridgers was twenty, she briefly dated the singer-songwriter Ryan Adams, who is some twenty years her senior. He produced "Killer," a three-song EP that Bridgers recorded in 2014 and released on his label, Pax Americana. "We'd had this relationship, and then it soured," she told me. "I don't think I even thought of it as abuse at all at the time. I had a crush on him, and he wanted to hook up, and I was, like, 'Oh, my God, this is so cool, I'm, like, living my best adult life right now.' Then it went bad, and it was just years and years of thinking about it." In 2019, Bridgers was one of several women who spoke to the *Times* about Adams's abusive and controlling behavior, which included sending predatory messages to an underage fan he'd met online. Through his lawyer, Adams has denied the *Times'* "extremely serious and outlandish accusations."

Bridgers has not heard from Adams since the *Times* story ran. "There are Twitter accounts that pop up that are, like, 'You fucking bitch, you sold sex for success' or whatever, and I'm, like, 'Is this Ryan?' That's never been proven, but every once in a while some weird and specific comment will appear, and I'll think, Are you starting a million burner accounts and bullying me, or are these just your weird men's-rights fans?"

"Motion Sickness," a swooning single from "Stranger in the Alps," is about their relationship: "I hate you for what you did / And I miss you like a little kid." Bridgers almost never leans on platitudes or generalities, and the specificity of her lyrics ("You gave me fifteen hundred to see your hypnotherapist / I only went one time") often makes it feel as if we're getting a brief glimpse into her actual consciousness. Because she is so direct about her feelings—even when they're unflattering, or at odds with ideas of self-empowerment—her work offers listeners a funny kind of relief. Pop music has always favored aspirational fantasies over more graceless realities. Bridgers pined for a boyfriend who she knew was shitty—it happens.

"Sometimes I'll write a song, and I'll be, like, Oh, I don't actually feel this way, but it's a good line," she said. "With 'Motion Sickness,' I was, like, I really fucking hate this person, but that's not interesting, so I should write it as if there's more nuance to it. But in retrospect that's *exactly* how I felt, and how I feel. I had so much to get over, and there was so much heartbreak surrounding that situation. I was telling the truth. I trick myself into doing that all the time: 'This is just a thought experiment, this isn't my actual feeling.' Then it turns out to be real."

Bridgers's work schedule makes dating difficult. "I don't really think about it too much," she said. "It's hard to even have friendships." She describes herself as bisexual. "I think I just started to look really gay in high school," she said. "Girls who were feeling experimental would gravitate toward the girl with the shaved head, so I was kind of forced into figuring it out. I felt like my parents were trying, but I also don't think they believed me. I was totally allowed to have girls over, but I was not allowed to have boys over, so I was intimate with girls before guys." She added, "But I don't think I really felt comfortable talking about it, because I didn't feel gay enough. I've never experienced hardship because of it, other than Internet bullying—so I felt like I didn't earn it."

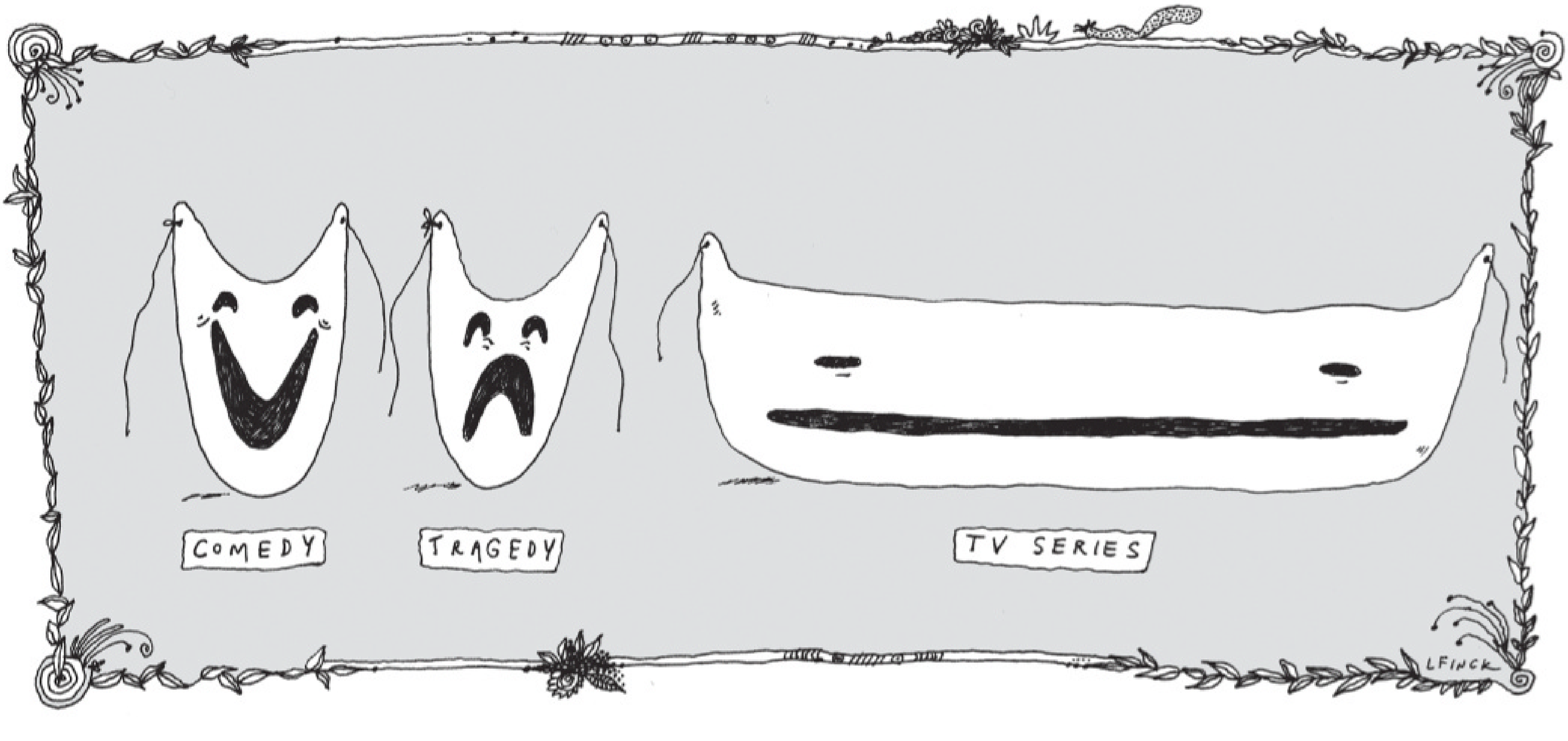
In 2018, Bridgers, Julien Baker, and Lucy Dacus formed a band called boygenius, and recorded a self-titled EP for Matador Records. Dacus told me, "I had opened for Julien, Phoebe had opened for Julien, and Julien had hyped each of us to the other." The group's name was intended as a sendup of boundless male entitlement, and the EP resonated—instantly and thoroughly—with exhausted young women. Dacus believes that Bridgers's candor is part of what makes her work so potent. "I think that being really blunt is a comfort," she said.

"Phoebe surprises me," Baker said. "She has really sound judgment in so many things. She'll do something outrageous, or antisocial in the most brutal way, but she does it with such conviction and severity that it's either hilarious or not hilarious at all."

"I don't have a yard, so I have nowhere to garden," Bridgers said, as we were finishing up lunch in New York. "But I do have a membership to Huntington Gardens, which is beautiful and famous. We should go!"

Yeah. We didn't go. The idea had been that I would fly out to Los Angeles in early April—we'd roam around Pasadena, check out the Museum of Jurassic Technology, maybe cruise by her high school. I'd watch her record an episode of "Jimmy Kimmel Live!" If things went well, I'd get to meet her friends. There's a lyric in "Garden Song" that describes a lovely and delicate-sounding moment—"See your reflection in the water / Off the bridge at the Huntington / I hopped the fence when I was seventeen"—and I wanted to go with her to see the fence and the bridge and the water, to hear more about what it felt like to be young and trespassing in Pasadena. Instead, Bridgers and I did what everybody was doing: we made do with phone calls, text messages, FaceTime. We both got sick.

The week I would have been in L.A., I began trying to explain the odd practice of profile writing to undergraduate students at New York University, where I teach. I was, of course, doing this work over Zoom, rather than in the classroom, and the technology added



"Please call me back, Diane—I'm standing here at the meat counter and I don't know what kind of steak we usually get and this man is just staring at me and this is all your fault."

a new level of absurdity to the endeavor. "The idea is to feel how a person displaces the air in a room," I said. "To learn something about them that they don't realize they're telling you." The students blinked back at me from their childhood bedrooms. My cat blocked the camera with his body. My fever held steady at 99.8.

Bridgers is active on social media, and I found myself sifting through her posts to see if they might contain some useful information, a process that felt both creepy and perfectly contemporary. Perhaps, I thought, if one can discern what sort of persona someone is cultivating online, then it may be possible to extrapolate some broader truth about the person she thinks she is, or the person she wants to be. Yet Bridgers is entirely herself online: funny, blunt, smart. On Twitter, she commiserated about the indignities and the indulgences of self-isolation: "If you put on jeans at any time in the last 14 days, you are the Chief of Police," she tweeted.

On a Friday in early April, Bridgers played a brief set for Pitchfork's Instagram Live channel. She sat by a window, in her pajamas, near a rack of guitars. Her hair was wet. The leggy tendrils of a pothos plant dripped from a hanging pot. She strummed an acoustic guitar. Even in a crowded venue, between-song banter can feel stilted or slightly surreal. "Well. Thanks, guys," Bridgers said. "This has been awesome. O.K. Nice. Thank you. Uh, cool. This one is in the same key. I'm a simple man—I like this key. Bear with me. If I fuck it up, forgive me. I will fuck it up. But thank you guys so much. Thanks, Pitchfork. I'm such a boomer right now. I'm very impressed by this technology." Tiny hearts drifted across the screen. A small counter in the corner of my phone ticked past nine thousand simultaneous viewers. Bridgers started playing "I Know the End," the final track on "Punisher." Her voice was soft:

> When I get back I'll lay around
> Then I'll get up and lay back down
> Romanticize a quiet life
> There's no place like my room.

When she finished her set, she struggled to turn the Webcam off. "I'm gonna get roasted so bad for this," she said, laughing, before the screen went black.

Bridgers has been cooking and doing yoga. She doesn't normally drink—it makes her tired—but she admitted that she'd been easing up on that rule a bit. Tour dates opening for the 1975 and for the National have been postponed. "I wish I was on the shittiest tour right now," she said. "Touring in Europe can fucking suck—sometimes you have to pay to go to the bathroom, and it's fucking nasty when you get in there, and maybe there's no food besides sausage for days. But I would be in a van in Europe right now in a heartbeat." She had recently posted to Instagram a photograph of a giant Spotify billboard with her face on it, overlooking an eerily barren Times Square. The caption was "lol." She had decided not to delay the release of "Punisher," but still felt weird about putting it out during a global crisis. "Here's my thing, for your emptiness," she joked. "It's very poetic."

She recorded her "Jimmy Kimmel Live!" performance from her bathtub, securing a toy microphone to a stand with clear packing tape. A bottle of Head & Shoulders was visible in the corner. "Yeah, I thought that was funny," she said. "I needed something behind me."

One afternoon in mid-April, Bridgers and I made plans to video chat while she ran a few errands around a mostly empty Los Angeles. We would talk while she drove, and when she came across someplace significant she would park and show it to me on FaceTime. "Dude, right now, people are literally jogging around the reservoir without masks and I'm, like, 'You fucking idiots,'" she said. "It can feel very lonely to be depressed here. I don't ever feel that way in New York, where it's totally normal to get wasted by yourself down the street from your house and crawl back to bed."

First, she gave me a quick tour of her apartment, which featured a framed portrait of her late pug, Max—he died in the winter of 2019, and she has his name tattooed on her arm—and a chalkboard where visitors can leave drawings and notes. (Her brother, Jackson, had contributed an impressive sketch of Squidward Tentacles, from "SpongeBob SquarePants.") She was wearing a black sweatsuit and a yellow *The Paris Review* hat. She turned the camera to a corner near the doorway, where the blue scooter she rides in the video for "Motion Sickness" was folded up. "I do genuinely ride it everywhere," she said.

She drove her Prius toward Old Style Guitar Shop, a small store that sells used and vintage gear. It's where she bought the rubber-bridge guitar she plays on "Garden Song." "I have really nice gear, because my five best friends are really into gear," she said. We rolled past the Bootleg Theatre, where she first met Oberst. She parked. "They literally let me play every day when I was eighteen years old," she said. "I wasn't paying attention to the idea that you're maybe not supposed to play a million times in a row." For up-and-coming musicians without trust funds, Bridgers said, the scene in Los Angeles can be grim. Before she found the Bootleg, she paid to play the Troubadour and the Whisky a Go Go, two fabled L.A. institutions that, in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, were notorious for their raucous punk and metal shows. (It is difficult to imagine Bridgers on a stage briefly made infamous by Poison and Mötley Crüe, though on her song "Smoke Signals" she writes wistfully of singing Motörhead's "Ace of Spades" after Lemmy died: "Nothing's changed, L.A.'s alright.")

We drove past Café Tropical, her local coffee spot—it was selling groceries and other provisions through a small window—and toward a compound called Bedrock.LA, where she once rented a lockout, a rehearsal space where she and her band could store their equipment. She parked again. "It's so fucking gross," she said. "There are cockroaches, they got in trouble for having beer in the vending machines. We called it Poop Studios. But it's run by, like, the sweetest, most 'Beavis and Butt-Head' dudes—they just hang out all day and jam. So it's very pure, even though the actual owners are slumlords."

Eventually, she headed toward her mom's house, in Pasadena, to pick up some matzo-ball soup. When Bridgers was twenty, her parents divorced. The year before, their house had caught fire. "The metaphor is insane," she said, laughing. "Their breakup was horrible. Really, really vindictive and shitty. I think everybody who has had parents separate knows the feeling of watching people who used to care about each other just fucking hate each other. But it was so nice that it was *happening*. My brother and I were just so relieved."

She has a complex, seesawing relationship with her father, and recently wrote a song, "Kyoto," about it. The instrumentation is almost giddy—Mellotron, synthesizers, horns, Autoharp, a twelve-string guitar or two—but the lyrics are mournful. "You called me from a pay phone, they still got pay phones," she sings. "It cost a dollar a minute / To tell me you're getting sober, and you wrote me a letter / But I don't have to read it."

"I feel so much fucking empathy and so much fucking anger toward him," she said. Their dynamic continues to evolve—"It'll always be day to day: Are we talking, are we not talking? What's the vibe?"—but she remains close to her mother, Jamie. "Since they got divorced, she's started doing standup comedy," Bridgers said. "Which is incredible. Her brand is very 'divorced.' She also just got her real-estate license."

We pulled up in front of the house, which has an enormous oak tree on the front lawn. Jamie popped outside and set down a tote bag full of food, including some eggs from a neighbor's chickens. "You want to come inside?" she asked Bridgers.

"I can't come inside! No coming inside!"

"You want me to put the gloves on and walk her through the house?" Jamie asked, pointing to the phone.

"Sure," Bridgers said.

"Let me get the gloves!"

Bridgers stayed outside, swinging on a rope that hung from the oak tree. Jamie showed me Bridgers's childhood guitars and some old family photos. As a young man, Jamie's father was a rodeo cowboy, and in the living room there's a framed picture of him straddling a bucking bull. We wandered into Bridgers's old room, which Jamie occasionally rents to college students. "It's very messy," she said. She turned the camera toward a high bookshelf. "You can see all of Phoebe's 'Harry Potter' books are still up there." Jackson was home from college—he's finishing his last semester at Carnegie Mellon—and asleep in his room.

"I always knew she was going to be successful," Jamie said. "But I didn't realize she would get to check all the boxes, in terms of having a successful music career. I took her to see shows, when she was thirteen or fourteen, of people who are now playing on her records." I told Jamie it was hard for me to imagine my mother accompanying me to a punk show. "I'm all about the aesthetic and the idea of punk rock, but, I'll tell you, some of those shows were kind of hard to sit through," she said, laughing. "Or, actually, to stand through, because you never get to sit down at a punk show. They were loud, and they would always be on a bill with other bands that were super scream-o, and sometimes it would be a stinky venue that smelled like pee. But, in a way, I was proud, because I was never cool enough to hang out with those kids in high school."

Bridgers collected her groceries, said goodbye to her mom, and climbed back into her Prius. The lack of traffic meant that the drive back to Silver Lake would take less than twenty minutes. I asked Bridgers if she thought "Punisher" told a story about who she is right now. "It definitely captures a period in my life, but I think I'll know way more in five years," she said. "It's like reading your subconscious." I couldn't tell what Los Angeles looked like just then—empty, quiet, blurring outside her car window. One day, we might get a song about it. ♦

LETTER FROM IRAN

THE ENEMY IS HERE

After decades of hostility with America, Ayatollah Khamenei faces threats from within his own country.

BY DEXTER FILKINS

One night last December, the chief resident physician at a hospital in the Iranian city of Gorgan was asked to consult on a baffling case: a patient was racked with a mysterious virus, which was advancing rapidly through his body. The doctor, who asked to be identified only as Azad, for fear of retribution by authorities, performed a CT scan and a series of chest X-rays, but the virus overwhelmed the patient before he could decide on a treatment. After reading reports from China, Azad determined that the cause of death was the coronavirus. "I'd never seen anything like it before," he told me.

More patients started coming in, first a few at a time, then in droves, many of them dying. When Azad and his colleagues alerted hospital officials that they were treating cases of the coronavirus, they were told to keep quiet. "We were given special instructions not to release any statistics on infection and death rates," a second doctor told me. The medical staff was ordered not to wear masks or protective clothing. "The aim was to prevent fear in the society, even if it meant high casualties among the medical staff," Azad said.

As the weeks went on, and the epidemic exploded in China, the Iranian media remained nearly silent. Two reporters who work at a news outlet in Tehran told me that they could see accounts of the virus on social media, but their editors made it clear they should not pursue them; nationwide parliamentary elections were scheduled for February 21st, and news about the virus could discourage voters. "Everyone knows what stories can get you in trouble," one reporter told me. "It was understood that anything that helped to lower turnout would be helping the counter-revolutionaries, and no one wanted to be accused of supporting foreign-based opposition groups."

Officials were also worried about relations with China—one of the few countries that has continued to buy Iranian oil since the imposition of American-backed sanctions. For weeks after the outbreak was reported in Wuhan, Iran's Mahan Air continued direct flights there. Mahan is controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the powerful security force that increasingly acts as a shadow government in Iran.

Two days before the election, on February 19th, the Iranian government finally announced that two citizens had died of the coronavirus. In the Tehran newsroom, bitter laughter broke out. "We reported deaths before we even reported any infections," the reporter told me. "But that's life in the Islamic Republic." By then, hundreds of sick patients were crowding the hospital in Gorgan. So many bodies piled up that a local cemetery hired a backhoe to dig graves. "It was worse than treating soldiers on a battlefield," the second doctor said.

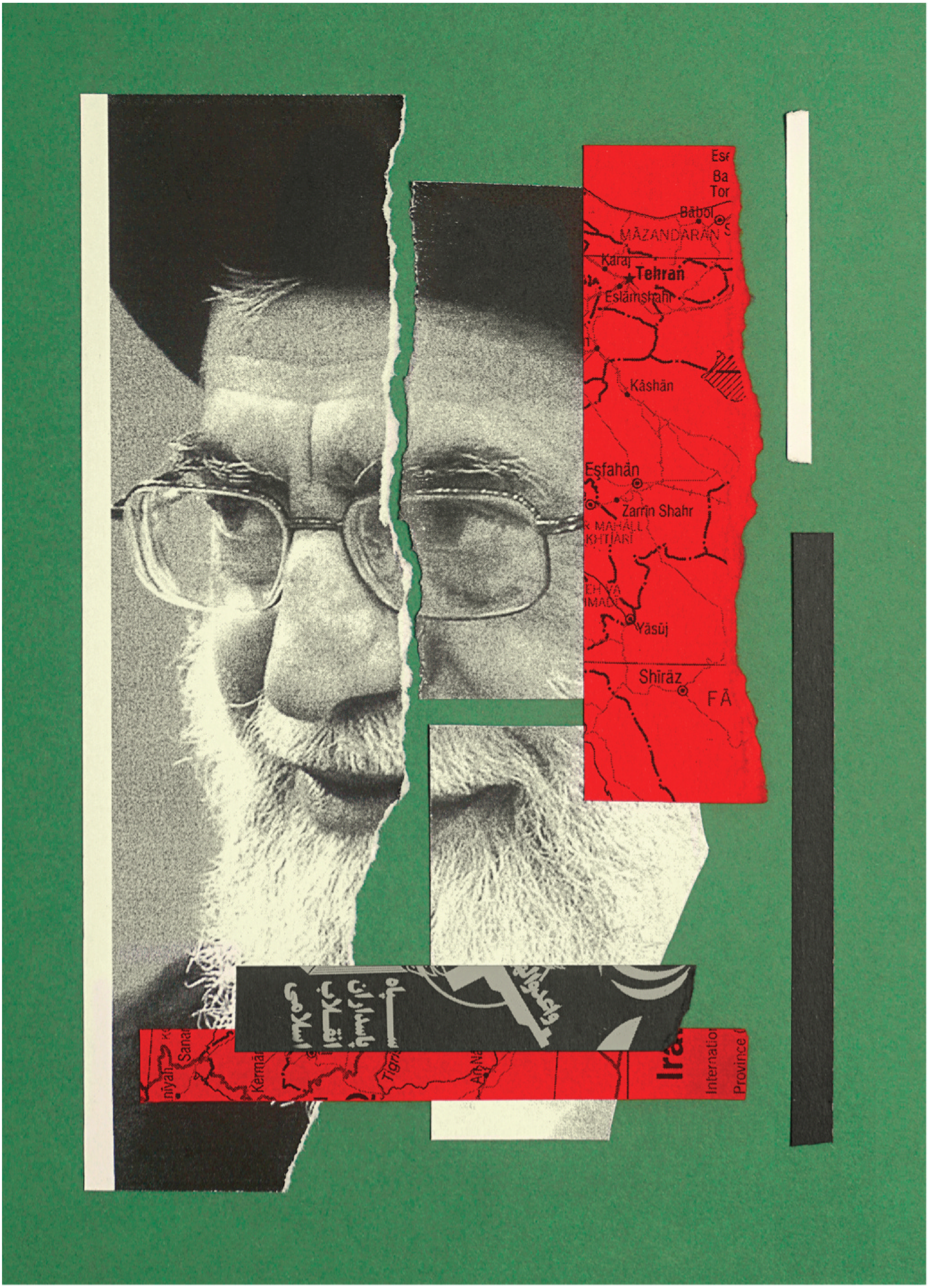
Soon, Iran became a global center of the coronavirus, with nearly seventy thousand reported cases and four thousand deaths. But the government maintained tight control over information; according to a leaked official document, the Revolutionary Guard ordered hospitals to hand over death tallies before releasing them to the public. "We were burying three to four to five times as many people as the Ministry of Health was reporting," Azad said. "We could have dealt with this—we could have quarantined earlier, we could have taken precautions like the ones the Chinese did in Wuhan—if we had not been kept in the dark." On February 24th, Iraj Harirchi, the deputy health minister, appeared at a press conference and denied covering up the scale of infections. He looked pale and flustered, and he repeatedly wiped sweat from his brow. The next day, he, too, tested positive.

In mid-March, the Washington *Post* published satellite photos of newly dug mass graves. A few weeks later, inmates rioted at prisons across the country, terrified that they were trapped with the virus, and guards opened fire, killing at least thirty-five. As the pandemic devastated an economy already weakened by sanctions, Iran asked the International Monetary Fund for an emergency loan of five billion dollars. It was the first time in nearly sixty years that the government had appealed to the I.M.F., which it has historically described as a tool of U.S. hegemony.

With the country spasming, Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran's theocratic system, suggested that the United States and its allies had deployed a biological weapon. "Americans are being accused of creating this virus," he said, during a speech in March. "There are enemies who are demons, and there are enemies who are humans, and they help one another. The intelligence services of many countries coöperate with one another against us."

Even as Khamenei spoke, the virus was spreading to the highest levels of the regime, which is heavily populated by elderly men. At least fifty clerics and political figures were infected, and at least twenty died. The Supreme Leader was said to be closed off from most human contact, but his inner circle was still susceptible; two vice-presidents and three of his closest advisers fell ill. The virus, which seemed able to reach anyone, sharpened a sense of crisis among ordinary Iranians. Khamenei, who has led the country since 1989, is eighty years old and a prostate-cancer survivor, rumored to be in poor health. What will become of the country when he dies?

In February, I paid a clandestine visit to the home of a reformist leader in Tehran, who spent several years in prison but remains connected with like-minded officials in the regime. Concerned that


Bābol
MĀZANDARĀN
Karaj
Tehran
Eslāmshahr
Kāshān
Esfahān
Zarrīn Shahr
Yāsūj
Shīrāz
سپاه پاسداران انقلاب اسلامی
Kermān
Sanandaj
Tigris
International
Province

PHOTOGRAPH: PROBST / ULLSTEIN BILD / GETTY

Khamenei, at eighty, is beset by unrest. But, a dissident said, "this regime will do whatever it takes to hold on to power."

ILLUSTRATION BY TYLER COMRIE

he might be at risk by talking to me, I took a circuitous route to his apartment; midway through the trip, I got out of my taxi, walked to the next block, and hailed another.

My host told me that the country has reached a decisive phase. Public confidence in the theocratic system—installed after the Iranian Revolution, in 1979—has collapsed. Soon after Khamenei took power, he promised Iranians that the revolution would "lead the country on the path of material growth and progress." Instead, Iran's ruling clerics have left the country economically hobbled and largely cut off from the rest of the world. The sanctions imposed by the United States in 2018, after President Trump abrogated the nuclear agreement between the two countries, have aggravated those failures and intensified the corruption of the governing élite. "I would say eighty-five per cent of the population hates the current system," my host said. "But the system is incapable of reforming itself."

Speculation about Khamenei's longevity is rampant in the senior levels of government and the military. "The struggle to succeed him has already begun," my host said. But Khamenei has spent decades placing loyalists throughout the country's major institutions, building a system that serves and protects him. "Khamenei is like the sun, and the solar system orbits around him," he told me. "This is my worry: What happens when you take the sun out of the solar system? Chaos."

Before the revolution remade Iran, Khamenei was a young cleric in the city of Mashhad. He had grown up modestly, the son of a cleric; a slender man, he had a long, thin face adorned by large round glasses that gave him an owlish demeanor. He was a devotee of Persian poetry and literature, and also came to admire Tolstoy, Steinbeck, and especially Victor Hugo, whose "Les Misérables" he described as "a miracle . . . a book of sociology, a book of history, a book of criticism, a divine book, a book of love and feeling." Khamenei was influenced by the radical Islamist thinkers of his time, particularly Sayyid Qutb, who extolled the use of violence against enemies of the religion. But, at family gatherings, he kept his harsher ideas to himself. "He hugs people, he kisses the children, he talks very well with children," a relative who grew up with Khamenei told me. "When he wears the political dress, that's when he becomes bad. That's when he becomes aggressive."

As Khamenei was forming his views, the country was in tumult. In 1953, an American-backed coup had displaced Mohammad Mossadegh, the democratically elected Prime Minister. He was replaced by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, who dominated the country, with help from the U.S. and from a ruthless force of secret police. In the years that followed, an exiled ayatollah named Ruhollah Khomeini raised an increasingly fervid opposition, built around the idea that a state led by clerics, answerable only to God and set against Western notions of modernity, could lift up the country after decades of humiliation.

"Come to bed. There will be plenty of time in the morning to figure out how something like this could have happened."

Khamenei embraced this revolutionary world view and began travelling the country, urging clerics to rouse their congregants. Soon after, he got married, and his wife, Mansoureh, was struck by his intense conviction. "In the first months of our marriage, my husband asked me, 'How would you feel if I was arrested?'" she said, in a 1993 interview with an Iranian women's magazine. "I was very upset at first. But he spoke about the clashes, the risks and problems, and how this is the duty of all people, and that convinced me completely."

Khamenei was imprisoned six times by the Shah's secret police, including a stint, in 1974, at a Tehran prison euphemistically named the Joint Anti-Sabotage Committee. Houshang Asadi, a cellmate there, remembers him as a kindly if austere man, gentle enough to feed one of his fellow-prisoners after a session of torture. Khamenei would read the Quran aloud and sob, lost in the words of the Prophet, or simply peer at the sky through the bars of his cell. Asadi, an atheist, preferred to pass the time by entertaining his cellmates with a large repertoire of jokes. "Whenever I told a sex joke, Khamenei didn't like it," Asadi said when I met him in Paris, where he lives in exile. "I told them anyway, because everyone else liked them. He would plead with me to stop."

After the Shah fled, in 1979, and Khomeini became the country's Supreme Leader, Khamenei was named the deputy defense minister, and the Friday prayer leader for the city of Tehran. He started amid a crisis. Not long before, a group of young zealots had stormed the American Embassy and taken fifty-two hostages, most of them diplomats, whom they accused of being spies. The siege lasted four hundred and forty-four days and destroyed any hope of an early American-Iranian rapprochement.

Khamenei opposed the seizure at

first, but endorsed it when it became impossible to undo. John Limbert, a political officer who was among those held at the Embassy, recalled that, several months into the ordeal, Khamenei visited with a camera crew, intending to show that the hostages were well treated. Limbert tried to turn the tables, pretending that he was hosting Khamenei in his home. "I apologized for not being able to offer him anything to eat or drink, and for the really bad conditions," Limbert told me. "He didn't apologize, but he was confused and embarrassed. He knew I was taunting him."

The revolutionary government had established itself, but it was not fully in control. In 1980, Saddam Hussein, the dictator of Iraq, sent his army across the border, beginning a catastrophic war that lasted eight years and killed as many as a million people. Within Iran, the leftist groups that had once fought alongside the Islamists were excluded from power; when Khomeini led a crackdown on his former allies, some of them fought back. Among them was the Mujahideen-e-Khalq, an extremist group bolstered by funding from Saddam. The M.E.K. established a vast camp in Iraq, where a cultish atmosphere prevailed, with spouses banned and members required to record their sexual thoughts in special notebooks. From across the border, the group launched a campaign of assassination and terror attacks.

In June, 1981, as Khamenei prepared to give a sermon at Tehran's Abouzar Mosque, a bomb, planted in a tape recorder and placed in front of him, exploded. He was gravely wounded; according to his own account of the incident, his pulse stopped. He lost his hearing in one ear and the use of his right arm. Afterward, he gave a bluff assessment of the injury's effects: "I won't need the hand; it would suffice if my brain and tongue work." But people who knew him said that he seemed changed. The relative who grew up with him noted that he shakes hands only with his left hand. "For forty years, he's had a piece of meat hanging from his body, and it still causes him pain," he said. "This personal experience made him deeply angry inside—it gave him a grudge against people." A few months after the attack, Khamenei was elected President.

Eight years later, Khomeini died, leaving the revolution without a unifying figure. According to Iran's constitution, the Supreme Leader would be chosen by a group of senior clerics known as the Assembly of Experts. Khamenei was a member of the assembly, but not a highly placed one and not a favorite for the job. His selection was engineered by Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, one of the dominant political leaders of his time, who replaced Khamenei as President; many believe that he saw Khamenei as easy to manipulate. When the choice was announced, Khamenei made a show of proclaiming his lack of expertise in Islamic theology. "I am truly not worthy of this title," he told the assembly. "My nomination should make us all cry tears of blood." Skeptics regarded this as a classic display of *taarof*, a Persian tradition of overweening, even insincere politeness.

The job gave Khamenei nearly absolute power: control of every branch of the government, command of the armed forces, and supervision of the judiciary. He proved to be a nimble and energetic autocrat, creating a parallel structure for each institution. "This is how he kept everyone weak," Mehdi Khalaji, a former Shiite cleric in Iran who is now a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said. Khamenei also oversaw the country's largest concentrations of wealth: an array of institutional funds, built on property seized from the Shah's élite, which came to be worth hundreds of billions of dollars.

By this time, Khamenei and Mansoureh had four sons and two daughters; he moved the family into a house in central Tehran, at the end of Palestine Street, and walled it off from the public. The compound eventually grew to contain some fifty buildings, but Khamenei presented himself as an ascetic, dressing and eating simply. "We do not have decorations, in the usual sense," Mansoureh told the women's magazine. "Years ago, we freed ourselves from these things." (There were no pictures of her accompanying the interview. In four decades, she has never been seen in a photograph.)

In office, though, Khamenei moved fiercely against his enemies. He continued the regime's efforts to assassinate turncoat exiles, killing as many as a hundred and sixty people worldwide. He also helped preside over a murderous campaign against the M.E.K., in which tens of thousands of members were executed. Khamenei, still convinced of the power of literature, made dissident writers and intellectuals a special target, banning books, closing newspapers, and imprisoning artists. "Poetry must be the vanguard of the caravan of the revolution," he decreed.

Over the years, reformers in and out of the government pushed to strengthen the rule of law, to allow the press greater freedom, and to curtail abuses by security forces. Time and again, Khamenei sabotaged any serious effort at liberalization. One of the most notable moments came in 1997, when a reformist candidate named Mohammad Khatami won the Presidency in a landslide. As Khatami began to pursue his agenda, he encountered immediate resistance from inside the regime. Early in his term, the country was shaken by what became known as the Chain Murders: the killing of about eighty artists and dissident intellectuals, some of whom were mutilated, stabbed, or given lethal injections. The press, seizing on the new freedom that Khatami allowed, produced a series of exposés, revealing that the murders had been carried out by operatives from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, largely to terrorize Khatami's most articulate supporters.

In response, the Iranian government closed the newspaper *Salam*, which had reported vigorously on the scandal. Protests began at Tehran University, and quickly spread to colleges around the country. Khamenei had initially expressed revulsion at the murders, but, when it became clear that the protesters threatened his power, he turned on them. Security forces attacked a dormitory at Tehran University, killing four students, wounding three hundred, and arresting four hundred more. Khamenei was unmoved. "Officials in the government, especially those in charge of public security, have been emphatically

"No, you can't go back now. We're climbing this cliff as a family."

• •

instructed to put down the corrupt and warring elements with insight and power," he said. Khatami, rendered virtually powerless, left office in 2005.

This February 11th, the forty-first anniversary of the revolution, a celebration was scheduled for downtown Tehran. I was at a restaurant in the city that morning, when a waitress overheard me discussing plans to attend. "You're going?" she asked with a sneer. "They force people to be there—they blackmail them. They tell people that if they don't go they will lose their jobs."

A parade wound down Independence Boulevard for more than two miles. Along the way, placards proclaimed the victory of the revolution, and on every block hung portraits of Khomeini and Khamenei. The festivities seemed subdued, though, with small bands of marchers shepherding kids bundled against the cold. Some of the attendees dutifully cried "Death to America" and "Death to Israel." But when Hassan Rouhani, the country's President, came to the lectern in Freedom Square there was barely a murmur. Most people carried on talking to one another. "Rouhani promised that after the nuclear deal most of our problems would be solved," a woman named Majideh told me. "We decided to believe in a miracle. Look what happened."

The sense of unreality didn't stop at the parade; it accompanied me throughout my time in Iran. Even the circumstances of my arrival seemed cynically managed. I'd been asking for years for permission to visit, only to be refused. Then, in February, I got an unanticipated call from the Iranian Interests Section, in Washington, informing me that a visa had been approved. (Some Iranians suggested that, with international tensions high and the pandemic still in its early stages, the regime wanted to make a show of confidence.) The visa, I was told, took effect immediately and would expire in six days. I ran for the airport.

In Tehran, I was met by a pleasant, capable woman, assigned by a government contractor to be my guide. The arrangement was designed to limit my contact to people approved by the government. It meant that the most revealing conversations were those I set up on my own, with Iranians willing to risk meeting me after my minder had gone home for the evening. There weren't many takers. Early in my visit, a Tehran lawyer, who quietly supports women's-rights initiatives, offered to bring together activists from four separate organizations. They all refused. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's too dangerous."

The dissidents who agreed to meet me spoke of surviving waves of reform and repression. One night, I met Bahman Ahmadi Amouee, a journalist and an activist, at a quiet restaurant, where we shared a meal of *kebab koobideh*, an Iranian specialty of minced lamb and spices. In the late nineties, when Khatami loosened constraints on the press, Amouee made the most of it. As a reporter for a newspaper called *Hamshahri*, he wrote a series detailing how businessmen and senior government officials exploited the country's closed market to enrich themselves. One memorable article asked why nearly all of Iran's chadors—the head-to-toe cloaks worn by most women—were imported. "The reason for this," he told me, "is that powerful people, in the government and out, get rich from the imports and by blocking competition." Amouee's pieces were read and discussed all over Tehran; criticizing the government was an exhilarating novelty. Khatami wasn't thrilled, Amouee said, but "he tolerated it."

Amouee also covered the Presidential election of 2009, which turned out to be the starkest test of Khamenei's commitment to popular rule. The election pitted a conservative incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, against a well-liked challenger, Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Almost immediately after the polls closed, the authorities declared Ahmadinejad the winner—seemingly too soon for the votes to have been counted. Iranians, especially those from the educated middle class, poured into the streets to protest that the outcome had been rigged. It was the beginning of what came to be called the Green Movement.

Amouee and his wife, Jila Baniyaghoob, a journalist and a women's-rights activist, joined the protests. "The regime stole the election," he said. "The people wanted their dignity." But, as the demonstrations gained strength, the security forces swept in, arresting, beating, and killing protesters. Khamenei expressed regret for the violence, but also made it clear that the protesters were going too far. "They are not related to the candidates," he said. "They are related to the vandals, to the rioters." On the ninth day of protests, police came to Amouee's home and arrested him and Baniyaghoob for spreading anti-government propaganda. She was sentenced to a year in prison; he was sentenced to five. For the first three months, he was confined to a closet-size solitary cell, where the lights were always on—"white torture," he called it. "I couldn't feel anything, I couldn't smell anything. I just wanted to talk to someone, but there was no one. I talk in my mind, sometimes I lose my mind."

By the time the demonstrations subsided, ten months later, Mousavi was under arrest, and some four thousand demonstrators had been detained; at least seventy had been killed, and many others raped and tortured in prison. But the election and the protests marked a turning point for the Islamic Republic. Months later, a leaked video of a meeting of Revolutionary Guard commanders spread to the Internet. In the video, General Mohammad Ali Jafari, who was then the leader of the Guard, said that the problem was not that a reformist was prevented from capturing the Presidency—it was that the reformers had challenged the tenets of the revolution. "It was a blow that weakened the fundamental pillars of the regime," he said. The protests had presented the ruling class with a "new paradigm," in which it could no longer count on popular support, he said. "Anyone who refuses to understand these new conditions will not be successful."

Amouee was released in 2014. Since then, he's been bouncing from job to job, working as an editor and sometimes writing without a byline. (His memoir, "Life in Prison," was published last month in the United States.) I asked if he felt safe talking to me, and whether he wanted his name published. He didn't hesitate. "It is my right," he said. After dinner, as Amouee and I drove to my hotel, we passed a darkened intersection, where armed officers were pulling over cars and searching them. "It's all about maintaining fear," he said.

Khamenei did not always project menace. When he was first chosen to be the Supreme Leader, he was seen as weak, lacking the respect of his fellow-clergymen. So he turned to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. To build support, he reached far down into the ranks and appointed new colonels and brigadiers. "Khamenei micromanages the whole system, so everyone is loyal to him," Khalaji, of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said. "He is hyperactive. He knows every low-ranking commander and even the names of their children." The I.R.G.C. became the principal basis of Khamenei's power. In turn, he made it the country's preëminent security institution.

During the Green Movement, the Guard and its plainclothes militia, known as the Basij, were instrumental in crushing dissent. According to Abbas Milani, the director of the Iranian Studies program at Stanford and a former political prisoner in Iran, the uprising amounted to a political anointment. "Clearly, the regime believed it was going to lose control, and the I.R.G.C. and the Basij saved the day," Milani said. "The result is that the I.R.G.C. now has the upper hand. Khamenei knows that without the I.R.G.C. he'd be out of a job in twenty-four hours."

The most visible symbol of the I.R.G.C.'s strength is the Basij, whose members can be seen on street corners in every Iranian city. A less visible measure is its manipulation of the economy. When the clerics took hold, after the revolution, they secured control of large sectors of the economy, including oil production, factories, and ports. During the next two decades, an array of state-owned enterprises were privatized—but, rather than going to skilled businesspeople, many of them were acquired by the I.R.G.C. and its associates. Today, elements of the Guard are thought to own construction companies, oil refineries, and mines, along with a nineteen-story luxury mall in a posh neighborhood of Tehran. No one is entirely sure how much of the economy the group controls; credible estimates range from ten per cent to more than fifty. One indication of its wealth came in 2009, when its investment arm paid $7.8 billion for a majority stake in the Telecommunication Company of Iran; the I.R.G.C.'s total budget, on paper, was only five billion. In Iranian society, the Guard has grown into an untouchable élite. "They have their own schools, their own markets, their own neighborhoods, their own resorts," a former senior Middle Eastern intelligence officer told me. "The neighborhoods look like a carbon copy of Beverly Hills."

Since taking office, Trump has made a series of efforts to strangle the I.R.G.C. In 2017, the Treasury Department designated the Guard as a terrorist organization, and Secretary Steven Mnuchin pledged to "disrupt the I.R.G.C.'s destructive activities." But sanctions imposed by the West had a perverse effect. Because few countries could trade with Iran, the businesses that the I.R.G.C. controlled came to exercise near-monopolies within the country. As the U.S. and its allies policed international shipping, the I.R.G.C. tightened its hold on the sea-lanes and the airports, where oil smuggling and drug trafficking were flourishing.

When Rouhani became President, in 2013, he started working to restrain the I.R.G.C.'s power. He moved to take away some of its business holdings, encouraging the idea that "all soldiers must return to the barracks." He also led negotiations with the West over the country's nuclear program, which the Guard oversees. But both initiatives ultimately foundered, and the I.R.G.C. pushed back with a campaign of its own. In 2017, prosecutors, many of them loyal to the Guard, began a series of criminal investigations of people close to

Rouhani, imprisoning his brother on corruption charges.

Tensions became so acute that officials publicly discussed efforts to neutralize Rouhani. In a speech in August, 2018, Khamenei complained of usurpers who were "working on the enemy's plan." Two months later, Ezzatollah Zarghami, a former I.R.G.C. general and head of Iranian state broadcasting, said in an interview that the chiefs of several leading state enterprises had been preparing to "take over in many of those areas and manage them instead of the government."

The effort was thwarted, but there may have been another. Masoud Bastani, an Iranian journalist whose reporting has landed him in prison three times, told me that, late last year, the I.R.G.C. was moving to strip Rouhani of much of his power. A source who is familiar with the inner workings of the Guard told me that officers were planning to arrest roughly a hundred people close to the President.

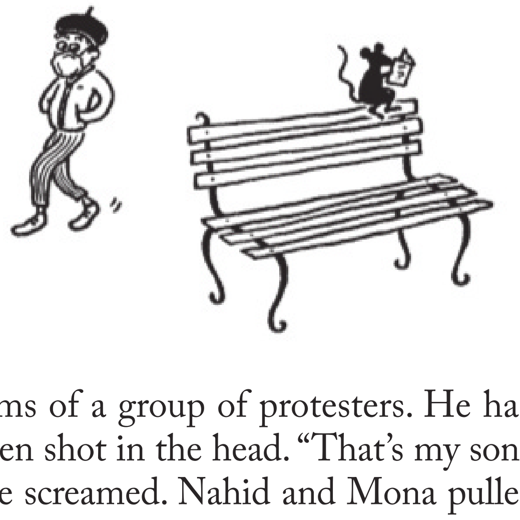
But, before anything could happen, Rouhani's administration threw the country into chaos. On November 15th, the government announced that it was raising the price of gasoline by fifty per cent. The news was released quietly—in the middle of the night, on a national holiday—but it was still met with outrage; Iranians drive everywhere, and rely on government-subsidized gasoline. Ordinary citizens began swarming into the streets to protest, touching off the largest and most disruptive riots since the revolution.

On the second day of the protests, Pouya Shirpisheh, a twenty-seven-year-old electrical engineer, was driving home from work, in the Tehran suburb of Karaj, when he passed a crowd gathering to demonstrate; social media had been pulsing all day with talk of the protests. At home, he shared a lunch of okra stew with his mother, Nahid. Afterward, he told her that he was heading into the streets, and asked if she wanted to come along. She agreed, on one condition: "Only if you hold my hand." Pouya's sister, Mona, decided to join him, too.

The Shirpishehs were sick of the revolution, even though Pouya's father had fought in the Revolutionary Guard for five years during the Iran-Iraq War. Pouya, who was hoping to marry soon and build a life, loathed it most. "Pouya loved poetry and nature—he saw beauty in everything," Nahid told me. "He also loved history, and he used to say these clerics have ruined our country. He used to say, 'We've never had such a terrible time, ever, in our history.'" The protests quickly became an outlet for broader frustrations. "We can see that the government is spending our money on other countries, sending it to Hamas, to Syria and Hezbollah," Nahid said. "The protests weren't about gasoline. They were about protesting the same bunch of people in charge for forty years, deliberately seeking a fight with the U.S. It is these people who have turned Iran into a pariah state. We cannot have any fun—Iran is a joyless religious dictatorship. We are forced into fake identities."

As the family joined the demonstration, Nahid experienced a rush of euphoria. The crowd was angry, but not violent. "America is not the enemy!" the marchers roared. "The enemy is here!" The police fired tear gas, but the marchers kept surging forward. Nahid felt suddenly free: "I turned to Mona and said, 'This is the best night of my life.'"

Pouya told his mother that he'd torn his shoe and was heading back to the car, and then he disappeared into the crowd. Nahid heard the sound of gunfire, sporadic at first and then sustained. She pushed through the throng, seeing people fall around her, bleeding from gunshot wounds. "How horrible it will be for the mothers of these sons," she told herself. Then she spotted Pouya in the arms of a group of protesters. He had been shot in the head. "That's my son!" she screamed. Nahid and Mona pulled Pouya into the car and raced him to a hospital. He was dead before they arrived.



The following days brought no relief to the family. "I was crazy with grief," Nahid said. At first, the security forces refused to turn over Pouya's body. Then they dragged Nahid and her husband to the police station for questioning. Plainclothes officers lingered outside the family's home. Men called on the phone and threatened them, she said: "When we asked who killed Pouya, the agent said it must be the M.E.K.," the opposition group. When they finally received Pouya's body, two thousand sympathizers turned out for a ceremony to mourn his death; policemen lurked at the periphery. In the months after her son's death, Nahid began to visit the mothers of other slain Iranians. "The crackdown showed us that this regime will do whatever it takes to hold on to power," she said.

The November demonstrations were remarkably distinct from those in 2009. The earlier protests were led by the middle class and by university students, and took place largely in major cities. The more recent demonstrations were begun by workers, the regime's traditional base, and spread rapidly throughout the country. They also turned violent; in many cities, demonstrators burned stores and trashed police stations. "The 2009 protests showed that the regime had lost the middle class," a shop owner who witnessed protests in his Tehran suburb told me. "The protests in November show that they've lost the working class, too."

The regime struck back brutally. "It happened very fast," a Western diplomat in Tehran told me. "The government switched off the phones and the Internet and responded massively—and the whole thing was over in three days. I think the regime was genuinely afraid." Iranian authorities confirmed that some seven thousand people had been arrested, but they have not disclosed the number of civilians killed. Amnesty International estimated the death toll at three hundred; Reuters, citing unnamed officials close to Khamenei, put the number at fifteen hundred. One dissident politician I spoke to endorsed the higher number, saying that she had been told two hundred people were buried in one area in a single night. "Then there is the second phase by the police, which few people talk about," she added. "They examine photographs of license plates to identify leaders and speak to informants to identify more. They arrest these people, too."

In a nearly unprecedented sign of unrest, the demonstrators began to fight back. According to Iranian news accounts, at least six police officers and soldiers

PROPERTY

What I think I know about the sunset is
the trees appear to be rising in front of it,
rising in front of the brilliant, splintered,
overripe light, toward animate clouds arrayed
and edged in grays and dusky pinks—a few blues,
damson, pastel—and that scalloping excellent white.
I didn't mention the green, the green that is
pushing itself everywhere, my being, and I was yes
slightly stoned, down in the gazebo, having sat
by the dam on the Mombaccus Creek smoking
for half an hour, waiting for the beaver to come back.
It did not. The only sound was a cardinal
in the trees and when overhead fourteen geese
honked me and headed south and now my children
up in Jackie's garden, arguing, ignoring the pleas
of the babysitter I am paying twenty dollars an hour.
I saw a red cardinal up at the car once one weekend
here last spring, so fiercely territorial his own
reflection in the wing mirror meant he spent
a good hour trying to repel the imaginary intruder.
I find sometimes I want all of it. The moment of
sunset. The beavers' architected dam. The colors.
The babysitter. The soundtrack of an endless
quarrel. An evening to go on and on burning.
Cocteau was asked if his home was on fire, what
one thing would he save? The fire, he said, only
the fire.

—Nick Laird

were killed, apparently by protesters. Four of them were shot to death, even though civilians are largely forbidden to have guns; others were stabbed. Security forces encountered resistance in such areas as Kurdistan and Khuzestan, which border neighboring countries. A YouTube video, purportedly taken in Khuzestan, shows security forces shooting civilians as they flee into a marsh. "That suggests there is some kind of organized resistance," Ali Alfoneh, a senior fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute, in Washington, said. "Ordinary civilians don't hide in a marsh."

A few politicians tried to raise an outcry. Parvaneh Salahshouri, a member of parliament, made a speech from the floor of the legislature, in which she denounced the military's influence on the government's decisions. "How can I, as a representative of the people, watch the murder of my country's young?" she said. She told me that she was accosted and harassed for days afterward.

Khamenei attempted to shift the blame, maintaining that the decision to use force had not been his. But he showed no pity toward those killed, saying that the security forces had fired on "hooligans" and dupes of foreign agents. "Such actions are not carried out by ordinary people," he said of the protests. "They are thugs." Khamenei warned that he would not stand in the way of the security forces in the future.

President Rouhani did not appear in public for several days. During my visit, though, he held a press conference, and I asked him how many civilians the government had killed. He gave a rambling response before concluding, "You're going to have to ask the medical examiner's office." (Iranian reporters later reached out to the medical examiner in Tehran. The office demurred, saying, "The Ministry of Interior is responsible for announcing these statistics.")

When I returned to my seat, an Iranian reporter, her face surrounded by a chador, turned to me and spoke loudly enough for much of the room to hear. "I noticed the President didn't answer your question," she said, in flawless English. "We hate him."

Away from direct confrontation with the Islamic Republic, Iranians carry on a parallel existence. It is a crime for women to leave the house without a hijab, but, in the well-off sections of northern Tehran, it is not uncommon to spot women walking down the street with their hair defiantly exposed. So many areas of private life fall under the state's purview that flouting the law is hard to avoid. In 2014, six Iranian men and women recorded themselves dancing to Pharrell Williams's song "Happy," and posted the video on YouTube, with the title "Happy We Are from Tehran." The authorities arrested them for violating laws that prohibit dancing with the opposite sex. They were sentenced to a year in prison and ninety-one lashes apiece.

At times during my visit, Tehran reminded me of Eastern Europe in the eighties, when ordinary people, constrained by a sclerotic communist system, coped by living as if the state did not exist. One night, I attended a dinner party in a middle-class neighborhood of Tehran. Iranian music drifted from the stereo. Women wore skirts and leather boots, their hair uncovered. Bottles of arrack and wine, homemade but delicious, were arrayed on a table. One of the men told me that illicit parties were so common that he had been making a living as a d.j. Almost every party received a visit from a police officer, who said, usually with a wink, that the music was too loud. "I give him some money, and he goes away," the man told me. Another man complained about the daily struggle of making his business work in an unpredictable and corrupt system, with chronic shortages of material and unruly inspectors pushing for bribes. "Plan for the next quarter?" he said. "I can't plan for tomorrow morning."

In Iran, some of the most intense unrest comes from frustration with the regime's intrusions into private life. One evening, I met a young woman, who went by Sara, who was involved in a recent protest movement to open soccer games to women. The protests gained prominence in 2018, when thirty-five women—many of them Sara's friends—gathered outside a match between two Tehran soccer clubs and demanded to be allowed in. They were attempting to do openly what other young women had been doing in secret, by flattening their breasts, painting on mustaches, dressing up in boys' clothes, and sneaking inside. All thirty-five were arrested.

The Iranian regime has repressed the women's movement with particular ferocity. In 2017, a woman named Vida Movahed climbed onto a utility box in downtown Tehran, removed her hijab, and waved it around on a stick. More women followed, and became known as the Girls of Revolution Street. The authorities arrested not only them and Movahed but also her lawyer, Nasrin Sotoudeh, who was sentenced to thirty-eight years in prison and a hundred and forty-eight lashes.

Sara was nervous about meeting me in public. "It is really dangerous," she said. "Me sitting here talking to you might get me in deep trouble." Still, she was poised and determined, insisting that she be granted her rights. "If you want to know how we live, you have to watch 'The Handmaid's Tale,'" she said. "This is the real Gilead. Margaret Atwood, she wrote our story before we were born."

Last year, a twenty-nine-year-old woman named Sahar Khodayari was arrested while trying to sneak into a soccer match and charged with "appearing in public without a hijab." She set herself on fire and died. Afterward, the authorities finally conceded—a little. Under pressure from FIFA, the international soccer authority, the Iranian government agreed to allow women to attend matches of the national team, as long as it was playing foreign opponents. Sara described the thrill of entering Tehran's stadium for a match between the Iranian and Cambodian teams. "The soccer field is really green when you see it," she told me. Even though the women were relegated to a roped-off area behind a goal, "everyone was screaming and crying," she said. "It was the dream."

I asked Sara why the authorities were concerned about something as trivial as a soccer match. "They know that if they open the doors to the stadium they should open other doors, too," she said. "But the women of this country are not going to stop. I am absolutely prepared to go to prison." All her friends felt the same way about the authorities, she said. "The problem they have with us is that, if women get power, they're going to take them down. That is the fact. They are going to overthrow the government."

On April 9th, Khamenei appeared on Iran's Channel 1 to talk about the coronavirus. Since the outbreak began, Iran has been devastated by the virus, with a hundred and fourteen thousand confirmed cases, nearly seven thousand dead, and no reasonable prospect of containment. Instead of acknowledging the government's failures, Khamenei declared a triumph. "The Iranian nation had a brilliant performance in this test," he said. "The people's coöperation has also created beautiful, fascinating, and astonishing scenes, and they can be seen everywhere." Iran's example shone in contrast to that of the West, he said, where crazed residents had emptied store shelves, committed suicide, and "fought with one another over toilet paper." He added, "The Wild West has been revived. That is what they say."

From the start of his time in government, Khamenei has proclaimed his loathing of the United States. In 1987, he told the U.N., "The history of our nation is in a black, bitter, and bloody chapter, mixed with varieties of hostility and spite from the American regime." He seems to take pleasure in recounting America's sins; during one meeting with government officials, he gave a discourse on "Uncle Tom's Cabin" as a depiction of "the realities of America and the American government."

The sense of enmity goes both ways. Ever since the revolution, the U.S. has pressed the Iranian regime over its sponsorship of terror and its nuclear program. But Khamenei has used the confrontation to justify crushing domestic opponents and to explain away economic mismanagement. Rising tensions with the U.S. have nearly always coincided with crackdowns on dissidents and intellectuals, and with the exclusion of reformers from ballots. In 2010, Mohammad Khatami told Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran expert at the Carnegie Endowment, that the Supreme Leader had once confided, "We need the United States as an enemy."

The Iranians' ultimate gamesmanship has involved the nuclear accord. For years, Khamenei opposed direct talks with the United States but periodically made concessions, even occasionally agreeing to halt the program altogether; all the while, he led his country closer to a usable weapon. Finally, in 2013, with the country crippled by sanctions, he began signalling that he was open to talks, calling on Iranians to demonstrate "heroic flexibility." The country's leaders hoped that a deal would produce a surge in the economy. That prospect collapsed when Trump cancelled the deal and imposed even harsher sanctions.

Several Iran experts in the U.S. told me that they believed the regime might resume negotiations after the Presidential elections this fall. Their reasons for optimism varied. Some argued that, if Trump lost, the nuclear deal could be revived; others said that, if Trump won, Khamenei would have no choice but to negotiate. Iranian officials rejected both scenarios, telling me that the Supreme Leader would never again make a deal. "The United States can't be counted on to keep its word," Mohammad Marandi, a professor at Tehran University, told me.

Over time, there have been hints that the regime is maintaining covert capabilities. The most recent ones surfaced in 2018, after Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, carried out a brazen plot to steal nuclear secrets from a secure warehouse in Tehran. Arriving in a semi truck before midnight, a team of agents broke into the facility and, using high-intensity torches, cut open safes. For six hours, they carted off documents and CDs, leaving just before an armed guard was due to begin his morning shift. According to a former senior U.S. intelligence official, the Iranian military launched an enormous dragnet operation, but the Israelis escaped across the border into Azerbaijan. Another former intelligence official told me that several members of Iran's security forces were arrested afterward. "There was a big purge," he said.

When reports of the raid emerged, Iranian officials said that the whole thing was a hoax, and that the documents were phony. The Israelis maintain that "the archive," as they call it, was a history of Iran's nuclear-weapons program until 2003, when the regime claimed to have largely suspended it. According to a Western expert, the documents detailed the existence of two nuclear sites that had been hidden from inspectors; one had produced uranium hexafluoride, a material used in the enrichment process, and the other was a facility for testing weapons components. Western officials couldn't determine whether the sites were active, but, when international inspectors, alerted by the Israelis, asked to visit them, the Iranians refused—and razed the testing facility. "There was a rush to clean up the site," the expert told me.

Last spring, Iran announced that it was abandoning the constraints imposed by the nuclear agreement, and stepped up its enrichment of uranium. A Western official who tracks the program told me that, at the current rate, the Iranians could have enough enriched material for a bomb in less than seven months. David Albright, the president of the Institute for Science and International Security, estimates that it could take half that long. Constructing a sophisticated weapon with the enriched uranium would likely require twelve to eighteen months more. A crude device could be ready to test much sooner, though—perhaps in the Iranian desert. Such a device probably couldn't be launched at an enemy, and would likely use much of the enriched uranium that Iran has. But, the Western official said, "the world would suddenly look quite different."

Thus far, Iranian leaders apparently have not begun working to weaponize a nuclear device. Yet the uncertainty has refocussed Western intelligence analysts on a pressing question: Will Khamenei decide to build a weapon?

Most analysts I spoke to believe that he will not, unless the regime faces an existential threat from outside the country. But if he dies? "The day he's gone, then I think all options are on the table," the Western official said.

On January 6th, Khamenei stood at the front of a huge crowd at Tehran University and wept. He was there for the funeral of Qassem Suleimani—the head of the élite Quds Force, who had, through military pressure, political maneuvering, and ruthless terror attacks, made Iran the most influential country in the Middle East. He had been killed three days before, on Trump's orders, when an MQ-9 Reaper drone struck his convoy near the Baghdad airport. Footage shared with me by an Iraqi official showed one of Suleimani's hands, charred and torn from his body, with a distinctive ruby signet ring still intact—enough to prove his identity.

Suleimani's killing provoked an outpouring of national mourning, with millions of Iranians coming to see his body as his funerary procession travelled the country. In Tehran, the line of mourners stretched more than three miles. During the funeral, Khamenei lamented, "God, the wrapped bodies that are in front of our feet are your worshippers and the children of your worshippers." He seemed to be bidding goodbye not just to a national hero but also to someone whose popularity he could never hope to match.

Suleimani was a principal architect of Iran's foreign policy, but he was also believed to have been deeply involved in domestic decisions, including the suppression of the rebellions in 1999 and 2009. He was the Supreme Leader's closest counsellor—"Khamenei saw him like a son," Marandi, the professor at Tehran University, who knew Suleimani, said—and was the only Revolutionary Guard general who was never rotated out of his job. A senior Iraqi official recalled once asking Suleimani why he didn't run for President. Suleimani thought for a moment and said, "Why would I do that?" The official explained his logic: "Suleimani had all the power and no accountability."

Suleimani was also expected to help Khamenei orchestrate the selection of a successor, insuring that the next Supreme Leader suited his wishes. According to Iran's constitution, the process is as regimented as the Vatican's method for anointing a Pope: the new leader is to be selected by the Assembly of Experts, who have largely been appointed with Khamenei's approval. But most current members belong to the original revolutionary generation, and are now visibly slowed by age. Sadjadpour, of the Carnegie Endowment, described the demographics: "The median age is deceased."

Khamenei's first choice is likely to be his son, Mojtaba, a cleric in Tehran. In recent years, Khamenei has elevated Mojtaba's profile and given him more responsibility in overseeing the government. But many Iranians believe that, after Khamenei departs, the I.R.G.C. will become enmeshed in selecting a new Supreme Leader. Some expect the Guard to try to rule outright. Several former commanders have already assumed prominent political roles, aided by the institution's ability to spend its vast resources on favored candidates. "The I.R.G.C. is not going to take over all of a sudden," Alfoneh, of the Arab Gulf States Institute, said. "It's a slow-motion coup that's been in the works for years."

Most people I spoke with believed

1048
ANO
Victoria Roberts

"I told you celebrities are often a lot shorter in real life."

"See, you just turn it on and stand here and it slides you right to the shirt you want to wear."

that the Guard would maintain a façade of clerical rule. Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's Chief Justice, is frequently mentioned as a candidate. Raisi, along with leading the judiciary, is an influential member of the Assembly of Experts. He also proved his revolutionary fervor at the end of the Iran-Iraq War, when he helped carry out the extrajudicial killings of thousands of M.E.K. prisoners and other leftists. "He's drenched in blood," Reuel Gerecht, an Iran analyst and a former C.I.A. officer, told me.

The coronavirus outbreak has only strengthened the I.R.G.C.'s influence. In March, Khamenei gave the Guard responsibility for containing the virus, and since then it has deployed tens of thousands of troops throughout the country. A public-health specialist working for the Ministry of Health told me that thousands of Basij militiamen are moving around Iran, without any protective gear, to disinfect buildings and streets. "The guards are trying to solve the coronavirus problem in Iran by brute force," the specialist said. In Tehran and elsewhere in the country, the Guard has attempted to control information about the virus, including death statistics, the specialist said: "The guards want to contain any damage that has been caused by the wrong decisions—or lack of decisions—made by Khamenei, and blame them on the executive branch, the President, and the Ministry of Health."

Many Western diplomats and experts believe that the I.R.G.C. is dominated by officers intent on preserving the status quo, which has enriched and empowered them. With Khamenei still in power, most signs suggest that the Iranian state is becoming even more conservative. Before the parliamentary elections in February, legal and clerical authorities barred seven thousand candidates—more than half of those who attempted to run. Among them were ninety current members of parliament, including a number of conservatives. "Some were probably corrupt," a Western analyst who works in the region told me. "Some were not considered loyal enough."

Still, some Iranians believe that many of the I.R.G.C.'s senior officers want to steer the country in a direction closer to that of China: strict politics, but a freer market. The reformist leader I spoke to, who is in touch with several I.R.G.C. officers, believed that one of the generals would ultimately emerge as a benevolent strongman—"our Napoleon"—to guide Iran toward greater prosperity. The government would be run by technocrats, not clerics, and the generals would loosen controls on freedom of speech and dress. "They want to reach out to the middle class," he said. "Think about it: the moment they get the clerics out of government, they would be incredibly popular."

That prediction struck many Western experts as overly optimistic. The reform-minded officers inside the I.R.G.C. probably make up only one of several factions, which exist in a state of internal rivalry and dissension. If those factions are unable to agree on a Supreme Leader, then the process could go out of control. "I think the selection of a new leader needs to happen quickly—it's a twenty-four-hour thing," a Western diplomat in Tehran told me.

The deteriorating relations with the U.S. have had visible effects on Iran's domestic politics. The latest crisis is driven by the two countries' struggle for influence in Iraq, where Iranian-backed militias have stepped up attacks on American personnel; it was these attacks that prompted Trump to kill Suleimani. Khamenei vowed revenge, and, on January 8th, Iranian missiles struck two U.S. military bases in Iraq, wounding several soldiers. Later that day, a Ukrainian Airlines plane went down near the Tehran airport, with a hundred and seventy-six people on board. The government initially denied any involvement, but reports on social media revealed that the Revolutionary Guard had shot down the plane, mistaking it for an enemy cruise missile. Angry demonstrations broke out. "Everyone was against the government then," Sara told me.

Many Iranians I spoke to believed that the regime would strike again, in an attempt to humiliate Trump before the election in November. Some told me that it might try to take American hostages—evoking memories of the Embassy seizure in 1979, which helped destroy Jimmy Carter's Presidency. One academic with ties to the Iranian leadership said, "I think the fate of Trump lies in the hands of Tehran."

This may be bluster, but, as Iran's economic problems deepen, the regime could find itself increasingly tempted to create a diversion. The same might be true for Trump, whose rhetoric has grown more bombastic since the Suleimani strike. In April, he tweeted, "I have instructed the United States Navy to shoot down and destroy any and all Iranian gunboats if they harass our ships at sea." Iranian state media responded with equal belligerence, calling the idea "a fake Hollywood tale."

Even as Iranians speculate about who will succeed Khamenei, many believe that, whoever becomes Supreme Leader, the revolution is no longer salvageable. One of them is Faezeh Rafsanjani, a former member of parliament and the daughter of the late President Rafsanjani. Faezeh grew up amid the country's ruling élite but gradually became disenchanted with its ideology. In 2009, she emphatically endorsed the protesters. Speaking to a crowd of demonstrators, she compared Khamenei to the Shah—a cardinal insult—and denounced what she saw as a theft of the people's vote. "The protests must continue, until they realize that a fraud of this magnitude cannot be pushed aside," she said.

The speech helped establish Rafsanjani as one of the country's leading dissidents, whose famous name made her criticisms all the more threatening to those in power. Rafsanjani became a target of unrelenting harassment, especially by members of the Basij. In one incident, captured in a video that surfaced in early 2011, Rafsanjani was walking out of a mosque when she was confronted by an overbearing militiaman. "You whore!" he growled, inches from her face. "Do you want me to rip your mouth open? Should I rip your mouth open right here? We'll ruin you! We'll kill all of you!"

Asked about the incident a couple of months later, Rafsanjani told an interviewer, "This government is run by beasts and thugs." She was arrested, convicted in a closed courtroom of spreading anti-government propaganda, and sentenced to six months in prison. In 2017, she was jailed again, for criticizing the Revolutionary Guard; she served both of her terms in the infamous women's ward of Evin Prison.

On a gray morning, I met Rafsanjani in her office. She wore a pink head scarf that obscured her face, but her eyes burned with urgency and intelligence. (Despite being a proponent of women's rights, she wears hijab as a matter of personal preference.) While she talked, she sat—and occasionally stood—behind a metal desk covered with heaps of papers.

Rafsanjani had little faith left in the system founded forty-one years ago. "Even the people who say they are reformers are not really reformers at all," she said. She noted that Rouhani had taken office with an overwhelming mandate for change. "I had hopes for him, but he's the same color as the rest of them," she said.

Rafsanjani did not blame the Trump Administration or the American sanctions for the country's problems; like many Iranians I spoke to, she felt that blaming the U.S. was a weak excuse for the regime's failure to reform itself. "The coronavirus is just one instance," she said. "There have been many events in recent years that show that our politics have gone wrong." Iran's increasing schisms, she argued, were the result of the regime's flawed ideas. "One is the inessentiality of human life, which seems to be one of our most seriously pursued policies," she said. "Another is the national-security lens—we look at things that have nothing to do with politics or security through the lens of national security. And when you put these two together you start to realize why these things keep happening."

Isolated and dysfunctional, the Islamic Republic had reached a dead end, she said: "The regime has lost all popular support, and yet it is incapable of change. The result is that the Iranian people have lost hope. We are hopeless now."

Just before I headed home from Iran, I visited a Western ambassador in Tehran. When I told him that I was going to the airport, he said, "It's the second checkpoint you need to worry about. That's the I.R.G.C." On my way, I stripped everything from my phone and laptop—e-mail, photographs, encrypted-chat apps.

At Tehran International, I breezed through the security lines until I got to the checkpoint nearest the boarding gate. I was waiting for my backpack to come through the X-ray machine when a man put his hand on my shoulder. "We have some questions we'd like to ask you," he said.

I was led to a room the size of a walk-in closet, where five men were waiting. As we sat down, our knees touched. One man, sweating, with a pinched face and an ill-fitting shirt, led the questioning. Another man translated. There was no chitchat.

"We've been watching you," the interrogator said. I thought of all the Iranians I had met after hours, who would be in danger now. "You have been seen speaking to people without permission."

The interrogator took my phone, and one of his men carried it out of the room. I wondered how long my plane would wait for me.

"You have been seen entering restricted areas," he said.

I thought of Nicolas Pelham, a correspondent for *The Economist*. He'd been granted a visa by the Iranian bureaucracy and then been detained by the I.R.G.C.—one power center seeming to overrule another. He was held for seven weeks.

The questioning continued for several minutes, as the time of my flight came and went. The interrogator asked about Masoud Bastani, the muckraking journalist. "Who gave you license to meet Bastani?" he demanded. I was terrified that Bastani would be sent back to prison. But, as the interview went on, I realized that they didn't actually know whom I had met with.

"You have been observed photographing restricted sites," the interrogator said.

By then, the man had come back with my phone. Grasping for something, I told the interrogator to check it.

He looked at the phone, and found nothing. For a moment, he seemed embarrassed. Then he handed it back to me.

"You were right—you were not taking any photos," he said. "You are free to leave the Islamic Republic. Have a nice flight." ♦

ANNALS OF IDEAS

THE ROGUE EXPERIMENTERS

Amateurs want to make everything from insulin to prostheses. Will traditional scientists accept their work?

BY MARGARET TALBOT

One evening in February, I went to hear a lecture at the Baltimore Underground Science Space, a community lab in a former bottle-top factory. Like several dozen other "biospaces" around the country, BUGSS, as the lab is known, is animated by a spirit of subversive amateurism. Anybody can go there to learn about, and then do, the kind of cutting-edge bench science—gene editing, synthetic biology—that is generally confined to well-funded academic institutions and private corporations. Inside, a chalkboard with cartoon drawings of a microbe and a double helix welcomes newcomers, but the lab areas are seriously kitted out. BUGSS has a real-time PCR machine, the gadget that allows scientists to make millions of copies of a particular strand of DNA, in order to study and manipulate it. "We don't have a lot else that's *super* fancy," Lisa Scheifele, the lab's executive director, told me, though that might depend on how fancy you consider such items as a laminar-flow hood ("for working with cells and cultures that you really don't want contaminated," according to the lab's Web site), an Alpha Innotech gel imager, or a negative-seventy–degree storage freezer. "We have what we need," Scheifele said. "You can do most genetics here. You can do microbiology."

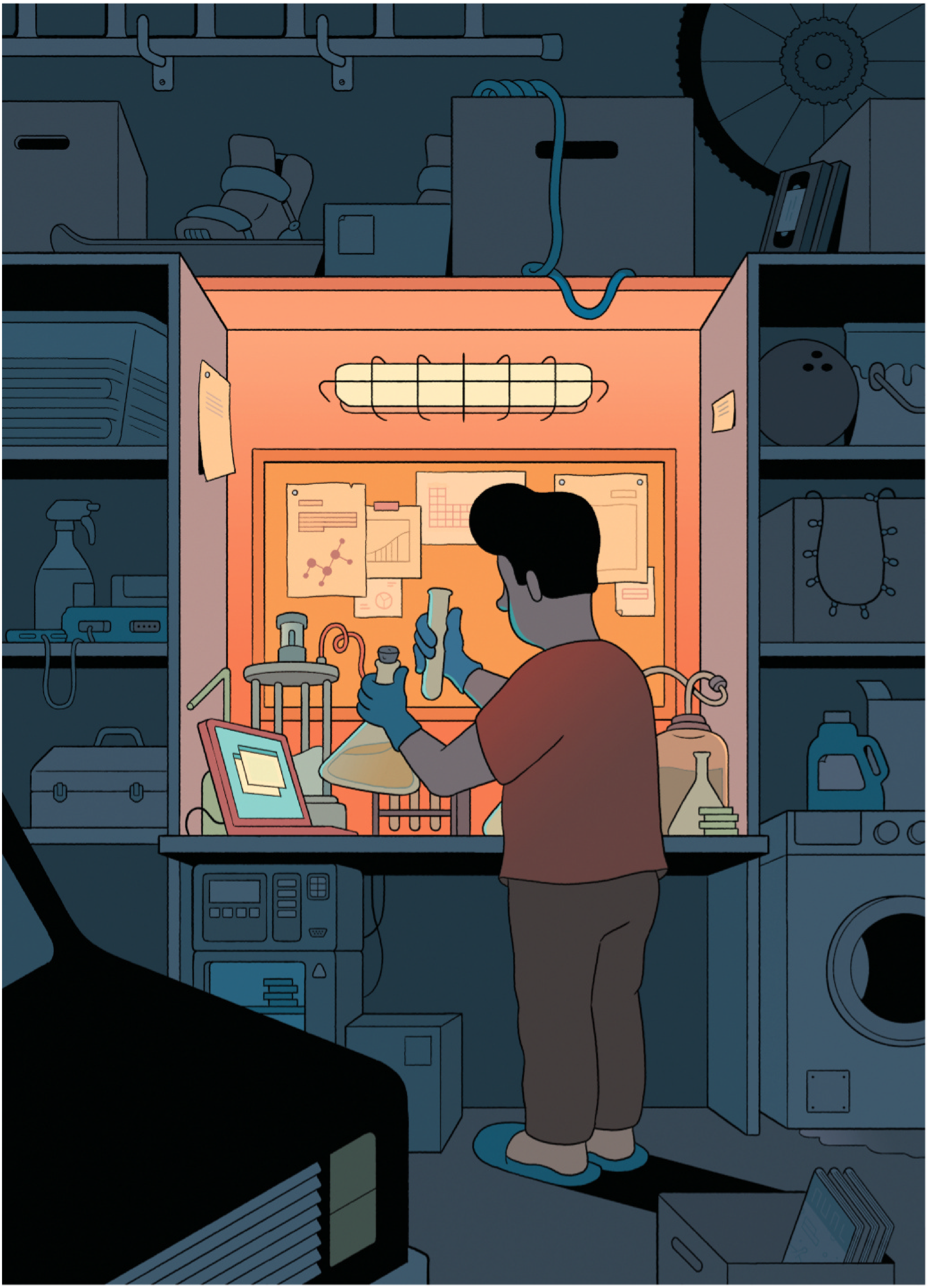
That night, two dozen people had filed in to hear Yann Huon de Kermadec—a low-key thirty-three-year-old with a Ph.D. in protein biochemistry from the University of Grenoble—talk about the Open Insulin Project, for which he hoped to recruit local volunteers. The project, which originated in 2015, at the biospace Counter Culture Labs, in Oakland, proposes a "biohack" for a stark failing in the American health-care system: the rising cost of insulin, the synthetic form of the hormone that 7.5 million diabetics must inject daily in order to live. Its goal is to replicate the insulin that is manufactured and sold in this country by three pharmaceutical companies—Eli Lilly, Novo Nordisk, and Sanofi—and to publish a protocol for safely producing it. The three U.S. manufacturers have lately been charging upward of three hundred dollars a vial. Eventually, the project hopes to launch a network of patient-and-worker-owned coöperatives that will produce small batches of insulin and offer vials to diabetics for about seven dollars each. At the very least, Open Insulin wants to show that such pharmaceutical code-breaking can be done, in the hope that it will demystify the drug-production process.

The Baltimore lecture took place a few weeks before the COVID-19 crisis necessitated social distancing, so we sat in tight semicircles. Pepperidge Farm cookies and mixed nuts were set out on a table, near a book for sale called "Zero to Genetic Engineering Hero: The Beginner's Guide to Programming Bacteria at Home, School & in the Makerspace." A flyer advertised an event, BioPrinting Breakout, which promised to introduce "3D tissue engineering to new audiences and applications." In the crowd, there were some hip-looking young couples, a middle-aged African-American man in a parka, and a sixty-one-year-old regular who works in computer security and loves the community-lab scene because, he told me, you can talk science as much as you want, whereas in "normal social situations people start running away."

Huon de Kermadec, who wore Clark Kent glasses, jeans, and a gray hoodie, introduced himself as "a French guy having my Ph.D. who followed my wife when she found a position." (He is married to Louise Lassalle, who also works with Open Insulin, and came to the U.S. to do a postdoc in biochemistry at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory.) Huon de Kermadec was originally attracted to Open Insulin because he thought the lab work would be fun—he loves the craft of biology but is annoyed by the academic pressure to publish. He noted to the audience that nearly half of American adults have diabetes or high blood-sugar levels, yet there are currently no generic forms of insulin available in the U.S., nor are there any mechanisms in place for controlling the price, as there are in Canada and in Europe. "If one of the three big companies increases the price, they all increase the price," he said. "Because they can." He showed a slide of a chart depicting an exponential curve for insulin prices. In 1996, Eli Lilly introduced Humalog, its synthetic version of the hormone, at twenty-one dollars for a ten-millilitre vial; during the next two decades, the retail price increased tenfold. Sanofi's Lantus and Novo Nordisk's Novolog have similarly soared in cost. (Eli Lilly recently announced that, during the COVID-19 epidemic, it would lower the monthly out-of-pocket cost of insulin to thirty-five dollars, but the drug is a crucial source of revenue for the company, and the price will likely rebound.) Patients with Type 1 diabetes typically require two to three vials of insulin a month. Even if they have insurance, it doesn't necessarily cover the entire expense. A 2018 study conducted by researchers at the Yale School of Medicine found that one in four diabetes patients scrimped on insulin usage—not filling prescriptions regularly, using less than prescribed—risking kidney failure, blindness, and death.

Jean Peccoud, a professor of chemical and biological engineering at Colorado State University and the founder of the journal *Synthetic Biology*, told me, "The price of insulin is something for which there is no technical justification, no justification other than greed. It's simple to make, with a large market. It should be as cheap as Tylenol."

The scientist who discovered that injections of insulin could save diabetics from a painful death wanted to see the



Hardware and software have been created in people's homes; now D.I.Y. scientists are taking on the wetware of life.

ILLUSTRATION BY GIACOMO GAMBINERI

drug affordable and widely available. In 1921, Frederick Banting, a Canadian orthopedist, derived insulin from the pancreases of dogs; he sold the patent to the University of Toronto for one dollar, clearing the way for it to be mass-produced. "Insulin does not belong to me," he declared. "It belongs to the world."

Open Insulin plans to use protocols laid out in published papers to perform genetic engineering on two organisms—yeast and *E. coli*—causing them to produce insulin. This is how pharmaceutical factories generally make the drug. Last spring, the group announced that preliminary results indicated the successful insertion of a target gene into *E. coli* cells, and the subsequent production of a protein that converts into insulin. The next step was to assess the samples, using mass spectrometry and other technologies.

When Huon de Kermadec mentioned this development, a guy with a close-shaved head and a Russian accent interjected to say that he ran a drug-testing lab, and wouldn't mind vetting some of Open Insulin's samples. The project was a "fascinating testament to the prospect of citizens doing science," the man said. Still, he noted, maybe it would be simpler for people who needed expensive medications to get hold of them on the black market, or in other countries.

Huon de Kermadec sighed. "You *could* find a way with a black market," he said. "But who will have access to that? You don't change the system." Pacing the front of the room, he went on, "What *we* aim for is more changing the way this is produced. It doesn't *have* to be a situation where Big Pharma exploits people's misery. We can design a better system."

Open Insulin has its critics, and not only lobbyists for the pharmaceutical industry. Gregg Gonsalves, a professor of epidemiology at the Yale School of Public Health, is a former member of ACT UP, which took a confrontational, anti-institutionalist stance to drug development during the AIDS crisis. Yet Gonsalves told me that D.I.Y. medicine is "like GoFundMe campaigns for basic health care—a sign of a broken system." The D.I.Y. movement, he continued, "is going down a dead end of desperation, when all that energy and anger might be better focussed on dealing with politicians" and fighting for universal access to health care.

Yet, given the profound flaws of the American health-care system, there is something hopeful about Open Insulin's approach. The group is considering teaming up with local hospitals and pharmacies, which would help integrate its methods with those of mainstream institutions. Kelly Hills, a bioethicist at a consulting firm called Rogue Bioethics, appreciates Open Insulin's efforts, a feeling that has only deepened during the coronavirus crisis. She told me that the decentralized production of standard drugs in small community labs might be a way of insuring that we don't run into shortages when traditional supply lines are disrupted. Drug shortages occur fairly often, even when we're not dealing with a pandemic, and they are "very scary if you are life-dependent on a medication," Hills said. "But, if you have a community lab, you're skipping manufacturing delays and pauses at borders. It would be a huge stress relief if you knew you could go to a community lab and fill your insulin prescription for a month for a few bucks." The big question, she said, is whether Open Insulin can meet the exacting safety requirements mandated by the Food and Drug Administration.

John Wilbanks, a health technologist at the research nonprofit Sage Bionetworks, told me that D.I.Y. medicine, for all its radical aspects, can be viewed as a quintessentially American project. "We have this whole culture of hustle and grind, in which you're supposed to find your own individual solutions," he pointed out. "Well, that's what they're doing."

The D.I.Y.-bio movement, which emerged in the early two-thousands, seems almost evolutionarily adapted to its historical moment. It echoes aspects of startup culture, especially the early days of personal computing, with its garage-based origin stories. First came the hardware, then the software; now even the wetware of life can be created in people's homes. D.I.Y. bio reflects popular skepticism about professional authority and gatekeeping, but it is not skeptical about learning or expertise. iGEM, a synthetic-biology competition for undergraduates which started at M.I.T. in 2004, has expanded to include people working in community labs and other extra-institutional scientists. The D.I.Y.-bio movement also feeds off the notion of the side hustle and the rise of Maker Faire events, which have lent hobbyists a cool new legitimacy. To some budding scientists who want to make a difference in the world, the challenges of climate change and pandemic disease have made biology more compelling than, say, computer science.

In recent years, it has become relatively easy for people to acquire sophisticated lab instruments such as PCR machines, atomic-force microscopes, and environmental sensors. For example, when new biotech companies fail, they tend to sell off their equipment for a discount, and community labs and biohackers scoop it up. Wilbanks told me, "D.I.Y. bio is very similar to the homebrew, hacker-club culture of the late seventies in Silicon Valley. If you've not gone on eBay to shop for a DNA sequencer that they can ship to you in twenty-four hours, check it out—there's a massive secondary market."

The D.I.Y.-bio ecosystem includes a lot of do-gooders, and many of them have been galvanized by the COVID-19 crisis. Ellen Jorgensen is a molecular biologist and a founder of Gen-Space, the country's first community lab, which opened in Brooklyn in 2010. She is now a biotech executive, but she continues to believe in the possibilities of D.I.Y. bio. Under the auspices of Just One Giant Lab, a collaborative network founded in Paris, Jorgensen is leading research on a diagnostic COVID-19 test that would eliminate the need for PCR machines, which, as commonplace as they have become in the U.S., are hard to come by in poorer parts of the world. Jorgensen's team is developing a COVID-19 testing protocol based on loop-mediated isothermal amplification, a low-cost method of replicating a virus's genetic material, initially developed by researchers in Japan; according to Just One Giant Lab's Web page, the process “can be done in a cup of hot water.”

Another veteran of GenSpace, Will Canine, co-founded a company that makes open-source robots. The machines allow labs to automate a tedious task required in a lot of modern biological research: dispensing precise amounts of liquids, over and over again. When the coronavirus emerged, a hundred and seventy of Canine’s machines were repurposed by a public-private partnership, the Covichain Robots Initiative, and shipped, at no cost, to hospitals in Spain. The robots can make testing for COVID-19 speedier and cheaper, and help eliminate humans from labs at a time when social distancing is crucial. Canine told me that D.I.Y. bio has a lot to teach our pandemic world. The movement has learned to use accessible language without dumbing down science, and it has also learned what *not* to do: “speculate about scientifically invalid and dangerous things in public forums”; “hoard protocols, data, equipment, reagents, or anything else that could be broadly useful to others.” Canine added that “D.I.Y. bio should not be concerned with doing the most bleeding-edge experiments but, rather, with making the most relevant scientific knowledge and tools available to those otherwise excluded from them.”

“Oh, Romeo, Romeo, I thought you said eight.”

The D.I.Y.-bio spectrum includes anarcho-libertarians. To the frustration of people like Jorgensen and Canine, this bro-ish element tends to attract media attention, because of a predilection for live-streaming stunts. In 2018, at a conference in Austin, the twenty-eight-year-old biohacker Aaron Traywick live-streamed his self-injection of a D.I.Y. treatment for genital herpes. (It’s unclear if it worked; Traywick died later that year, in Washington, D.C., while using a sensory-deprivation tank.) This part of the movement includes gonzo self-experimenters, transhumanists seeking to extend their life spans, and people eager to become cyborgs—by, say, implanting microchips in their arms which contain their medical records. One person I spoke to called this cohort the “You did *what*?” crowd. Another said that such people followed a credo of “because it’s cool, and because we can.”

Perhaps the best known of these edgier types is Josiah Zayner, a biohacking entrepreneur with a Ph.D. in biophysics from the University of Chicago, a cheeky public persona, and a slyly contentious relationship with regulatory authorities. In 2017, Zayner live-streamed his self-injection of CRISPR gene-editing technology, which was an attempt to enhance his muscles. (It didn’t work.) He also documented a self-experiment in which he transplanted matter from a friend’s donated stool into his gut, thus altering his microbiome. He now has a company, the Odin, which sells mail-order kits that allow you to try your hand at CRISPR, make glow-in-the-dark yeast, and genetically engineer tree frogs. Zayner seems to embrace the idea that the only interesting scientist is a mad one.

Last August, at a conference in Las Vegas called Biohack the Planet, Zayner gave a speech in which he noted that, in such nearby countries as the Dominican Republic, there were many desperate patients who’d be willing to try any kind of experimental gene therapy, even if there was a good chance that it would kill them. D.I.Y. radicals, he suggested, should perform tests on this population. “Why fight against the U.S. government when you can just, you know, fly a couple hours, and you don’t have to fight against *any* government?” he said.

Big Pharma makes a tempting target for some biohacking provocateurs. At the Biohack the Planet conference, a man named Gabriel Licina sat on the edge of the stage and gave a pugnacious talk about a project that he and two friends—Andreas Stürmer, a biotechnologist in Austria, and David Ishee, an oil worker, self-taught biologist, and dog breeder in Mississippi—had embarked on. They had, he announced, reverse engineered the gene-therapy drug Glybera, which treats a rare disease, called lipoprotein-lipase deficiency, that results in a dangerous buildup of triglycerides in the blood.

Licina is famous in the biohacking community for a self-experiment he undertook in 2015, with eye drops of his own devising, to create "night vision." (The drops contained Chlorin e6, a light-sensitive substance similar to one found in sea creatures.) If you Google his name, you'll discover photographs of him with his pupils dilated, his eyelids swollen, and his head shaved, looking like an extraterrestrial. He says that he saw farther at night for a few hours and suffered no lasting damage.

When the Dutch firm UniQure introduced Glybera, in 2015, it was the most expensive medication in the world, at about a million dollars a dose. Two years later, UniQure pulled Glybera from the market, because only one insurer, in Germany, would cover it—for one patient. (Approximately one in a million people have lipoprotein-lipase deficiency.) In Las Vegas, Licina said that he and his colleagues had identified the relevant DNA, sent their findings to an outside genetics lab, and engineered *E. coli* to produce the protein that is missing in people who suffer from the disease. (The process is similar to how insulin is made.) Licina announced that he had brought forty vials of the modified bacteria to the conference, and he periodically waved one above his head, chuckling. He invited scientists to culture, purify, and test his creation. But, knowing his audience's penchant for self-experimentation, he said, "Do *not* inject yourself with this thing. For the love of God, stop stabbing yourselves."

In February, I spoke to Licina on the phone. He was in South Bend, Indiana, where he runs a community lab, Scihouse, out of his home. "This is going to sound so flippant," he said. "But my friends and I decided to do the Glybera thing because we thought it would be *funny*. I mean, this was a million-dollar drug." Yet even its secrets were unlocked with relative ease, he claimed. (UniQure, which retains a patent on the drug, said that it was blindsided by Licina's "knockoff" but has not sued.) Licina said that he doesn't want anyone to use his creation therapeutically. He just wanted biohackers like him to stop making glow-in-the-dark beer—yes, that's a thing—and focus their thrill-seeking minds on more substantive projects. He was pleased when two Stanford undergraduates, Alec Luiz Lourenco and Cooper Veit, volunteered to test his version of Glybera at a university lab. Lourenco and Veit are part of BIOME, a student group that takes inspiration from the D.I.Y. movement and pursues what Lourenco calls "independent-type" biological research. (The BIOME project is pending, having been delayed by the pandemic shutdown.)

In many ways, the earnest, democratizing amateurism of community labs feels nothing like the snarky, performative energy projected by biohackers. The people I spoke with at Open Insulin are modest, serious, and, in some cases, steeped in social-justice activism. Still, there is overlap between members of the two factions—they know one another, attend some of the same conferences, and share a belief that real science can be conducted outside institutional settings. And they are similarly committed to making their protocols and findings transparent. One of Open Insulin's founders, Anthony Di Franco—a computer scientist who lives in Berkeley and is himself a Type 1 diabetic—told me that, though he thinks of Open Insulin as belonging to the "lineage of mutual-aid societies," he also sees the group as "definitely part of the biohacking community."

IN QUARANTINE, I REFLECT ON THE DEATH OF OPHELIA

I wake early and angry, I eat oatmeal with thyme honey,
I call my sister, I call my mother, I call my other sisters, my brothers,
I worry about my feverish lover, I worry about my siblings, jobless now.
I send an ill-advised e-mail, I don't send an ill-advised tweet.

I'm alone so I'm lonely. That's what my sister says.

Time to stay indoors, the doctor says, all the doctors say,
but the open window betrays that not everyone's voice dies to solitude.
Shut up, shut up! the window slams.
Time to embrace the virtues of boredom, the price of happiness again, after.

The window shows men digging a place for survivors of the future, the rich ones.
It will be a condo tower, glass walls for better envy.
They've built the frames, I see, around the holes where doors will someday go.
Capitalism! So full of holes and hope.

If I try to remember what it was like, childhood, a period of kudzu
growth that *felt* like stasis in the white-glazed room where days upon days
my father shut me—
if I try, I see the ceiling, that water stain trailing down
like brown Pre-Raphaelite curls, hair of a drowning girl among reeds,
which later I recognized in a painting of a pale drowning Ophelia.

I love alone, I tell my sister. She says, You just want to.

I agree I want the past.
For a magnolia to bloom on a crowded street, all safe in beauty, for I

The D.I.Y.-bio movement first emerged in places where biotech was booming, like Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the Bay Area. Some people who lacked the funding or the credentials required to work on biological research at the academic and corporate labs where it was being done began to equip themselves. Others wanted to demonstrate that high-level medical information and techniques *could* be shared. In 2008, Kay Aull had just graduated from M.I.T. with a degree in biological engineering when she decided that, before moving on to grad school, she would spend five hundred dollars setting up a lab in a closet in her apartment, and see what she could do with it. Among other things, she created a genetic test that could be taken at home for a disease that afflicts her father, hemochromatosis—excess iron in the

still love the world, though it drowns
and dies like that girl, avoidably.

A professor once asked, pleased we wouldn't know,
Who is really responsible for the death of Ophelia?
The answer, he said, ought to feel like we have arrived together
at a skyscraper's peak, where the inhuman
view reveals in windows and in streets
the small, sick or potentially sick bodies—each one a new array of questions.

The only possible epiphany is that the ending of a thought is never such.

Together. I liked the word in the professor's mouth.
But if I am alone, and if I am lonely, and if I am not alone in loneliness,
  and if the everyone
together suffers, and if this everyone suffers and dies by the unguided motion
  of matter, and if
also by the motion of craven, murderous men, and if also by the motion
  of money, and if of course
you were always going to die, Ophelia, and if even so your death remains
  unforgivable,
then what are the questions I should ask? All I have is sleeplessness and rage,
and that's no answer, it's not even a thought, though it might not end till
  my body does,
perhaps not even then, as I can imagine it going on past my ending, and really—
what more suitable ghost could I leave behind? Since I do love the world.

—*Elisa Gonzalez*

blood. She told me that, for her, it was an important way of "demystifying the science" and "showing it wasn't magic."

Community labs were launched in a similar spirit, bringing in members of the public to learn how to perform the latest in synthetic biology: DNA sequencing, protein engineering, CRISPR techniques. The pioneering GenSpace, in Brooklyn, was followed by BioCurious, in Santa Clara, California; Counter Culture Labs, in Oakland; and BUGSS, in Baltimore. In 2010, at a conference in Los Angeles, Meredith Patterson, a thirty-two-year-old computer scientist and science-fiction writer, gave a rousing speech that was later circulated as "A Biopunk Manifesto." She declared, "We reject the popular perception that science is only done in million-dollar university, government, or corporate labs; we assert that the right of freedom of inquiry, to do research and pursue understanding under one's own direction, is as fundamental a right as that of free speech or freedom of religion. We have no quarrel with Big Science; we merely recall that small science has always been just as critical to the development of the body of human knowledge. . . . A thirteen-year-old kid in South Central Los Angeles has just as much of a right to investigate the world as does a university professor. If thermocyclers"—PCR machines—"are too expensive to give one to every interested person, then we'll design cheaper ones and teach people how to build them."

In a 2017 book, "Synthetic," Sophia Roosth, a historian of science at Harvard, differentiates D.I.Y. bio from citizen science, the wholesome enterprise in which volunteers do such things as count migratory butterflies or identify celestial bodies, then hand over their data to professionals. "Though democratic, D.I.Y. bio is notably antagonistic, roguish, and mischievous in tone," Roosth writes. She also distinguishes it from pseudoscience: biohackers rarely put forward " 'crackpot' theories." Their aim "is for amateurs or nonprofessionals to make not new *theories*, but new *things*." The credo of D.I.Y. bio might be that of the physicist Richard Feynman, who, shortly before his death, in 1988, wrote on a chalkboard at Caltech, "What I cannot create, I do not understand."

Community labs such as BUGSS take pains to avoid looking jerry-built. They maintain safety standards and codes of ethics modelled on those of academic labs, and add extra precautions, on the ground that some participants aren't steeped in such practices. (At BUGSS, the rules include no use of infectious agents—phew!—and no work with human or other mammalian cells.) Christi Guerrini, a legal scholar and a professor at Baylor Medical School, who is conducting a research project about biohackers, told me that many community labs go well beyond "check-the-box compliance," adding, "There was one individual I interviewed who really struck me in his thoughtfulness around to what extent organisms can experience pain—he was very conflicted about it. The organisms he was considering working with were jellyfish."

Guerrini feels that D.I.Y. biologists often have a greater commitment than their professional counterparts do to making their work open to scrutiny—and available for free on the Internet. Their research might not be paradigm-shifting, but you or I could access it without having an institutional affiliation or an expensive journal subscription. (We'd have less confidence, of course, that the research was legit.) Among professionals, Guerrini said, "you have the phenomenon of scientists wanting to hold onto their data and sort of dribble it out, because they are responding to incentives around promotion and tenure and intellectual property."

If transparency is a core tenet of biohacker culture, it's also a defensive strategy. D.I.Y. bio arose soon after 9/11, and its practitioners sometimes attracted the attention of law-enforcement officials, who equated biohacking with bioterrorism. In a notorious 2004 case, Steven Kurtz, a SUNY Buffalo art professor who worked with bacterial cultures, had his home raided by federal agents. (Kurtz was eventually cleared of all charges.) Todd Kuiken, a researcher at N.C. State who has studied the D.I.Y.-bio community for years, told me, "At first, there was this fear that biohackers in the basement were going to release

“All units—we’ve got about half a revolting panini at the northeast corner of Bleecker and Tenth.”

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pandemics. These were really myths.”

In recent years, biohackers have largely figured out how to avoid intervention by the law. In 2016, Mixæl Laufer, a math professor in California who oversees an anarchist biohacking collective called Four Thieves Vinegar, devised instructions for building an EpiPen, the device that opens the airway of someone suffering an allergic reaction. He called his version an EpiPencil, and said that making it would cost about thirty dollars. At the time, Mylan, the manufacturer of the EpiPen, was charging as much as three hundred dollars for one. The EpiPencil was made by combining off-the-shelf parts: an auto-injector designed for diabetics which could be purchased online; epinephrine, which could be prescribed by coöperative doctors; a syringe and a needle. Four Thieves Vinegar, which is named after a medieval legend about a home-brewed antidote for the bubonic plague, shared the directions for the EpiPencil on its Web site and on YouTube. Because the group was not manufacturing or distributing the product, it technically did not violate F.D.A. rules. (YouTube removed the video, claiming that it promoted “acts that have an inherent risk of serious physical harm or death.”)

Since then, Four Thieves has started disseminating other work-around protocols, including a recipe for making a version of the overdose-reversal drug naloxone out of oxycodone, and instructions for concocting a homemade version of the abortion pill out of misoprostol. (Veterinary suppliers, Laufer points out, dispense a form of the drug, without a prescription, for treating ulcers in horses.) In February, I spoke by Skype with Laufer, who was in Singapore, where his wife recently took a job. He told me that he does not interact with patients who make something using Four Thieves instructions: “A lot of people ask about the relationships we have with people who use our protocols and technologies. But we don’t really have them, very intentionally, because we don’t want to be pushing what we’re creating.”

In early March, I spent an afternoon with Sebastian Cocioba, a twenty-nine-year-old self-taught plant biologist who has built a remarkable lab in his parents’ Long Island City apartment by making clever use of items purchased on eBay and what he calls “a little bit of electronics know-how.” In a small spare bedroom, Cocioba has a PCR machine (“one of the schmanciest, with an actual freakin’ touch screen!”); a gene gun, for injecting DNA or RNA into cells; a laminar-flow hood; a centrifuge; a vortex shaker, for mixing fluids; and shelves lined with bottles of chemicals and proteins. He put together this suite of equipment at a cost of about seven thousand dollars. (For fun, he’s affixed googly eyes to some of the machines.) Cocioba works on plant-tissue cultures and genetic engineering, and has expertise in designing and producing flowers with new colors and patterns. In his parents’ kitchen, the white cabinets are covered in notes, scrawled in Sharpie, from a meeting that Cocioba had several months ago with a Japanese businessman and an N.Y.U. biologist, who were hoping to create a specially patterned morning glory as a symbol for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. Cocioba’s mom, who sometimes doubles as his lab manager, likes how the marked-up cabinets look. On the refrigerator was a list describing the steps involved in engineering a blue rose.

I watched Cocioba lead a synthetic-biology workshop for students at the Parsons School of Design, in New York, and it was clear how much he enjoys sharing his techniques. He made the students laugh with stories about how, as a teen-ager, he’d first funded his lab by “flipping orchids”: he’d take home plants that Home Depot had thrown away because they weren’t flowering, expose them to blue light until they bloomed, then sell them back to the store. Cocioba, who studied for a few years at Stony Brook University but left for financial and family reasons, is now getting outside research contracts—one is from a private donor interested in genetically engineering plants to produce pharmaceuticals. (In 2017, a British research center announced that it had conducted an experiment that used genetically engineered plants to produce polio vaccines.)

Cocioba has shoulder-length hair, which he sometimes wears in a samurai-style bun; he favors shorts and T-shirts, and has a genial manner. He welcomes collaborations with academics and thinks it important that they not "ostracize the D.I.Y.-bio community," because "science is science." "Amateur scientist" is a label that he embraces, pointing out that the word "amateur" doesn't mean a novice. He likes to cite the example of Félix d'Hérelle, a French microbiologist who, with only a high-school education, "basically founded bacterial phage research in the early twentieth century." (Phages are viruses that infect bacteria but don't harm humans.)

When Cocioba has genetic-engineering clients, he "sets up an open lab notebook for them" online, so that "they see every day what is happening, as opposed to what my competitors—universities, mostly—do, which is just give them the plant at the end." When a student at Parsons asked him if he worried about being scooped, Cocioba said, "I'd rather be totally open and give these tools away for free. Because nothing is more inspirational than being able to build something yourself."

So far, D.I.Y. medicine's biggest successes have been less in making pharmaceuticals than in manufacturing tests and medical hardware. In 1994, Sharon Terry, a former college chaplain turned stay-at-home mom in the Boston area, learned that her two young children, Elizabeth and Ian, had a rare genetic disorder, pseudoxanthoma elasticum (PXE), which causes premature aging and other problems. After the children's diagnoses, two teams of researchers from separate academic institutions came around to collect blood samples. Terry didn't want her kids to get poked with needles repeatedly, and asked the researchers why they didn't just share the samples. That wasn't how academic research worked, she was told: the teams were competing to see which could publish findings first.

Terry and her then husband, Pat, a construction manager, read all the articles they could find about PXE. The literature was daunting, but eventually they began to see patterns. They decided that it would be helpful to create a DNA repository for studying the disease, so they collected tissue and blood samples from PXE patients and their families and began conducting research on the samples at night, in a space that they borrowed from a Harvard lab. In time, they became part of a team that identified the gene for PXE and patented it—not for profit but to try to insure that the discovery would be shared for research. Terry went on to co-author a hundred and forty peer-reviewed articles, published in such journals as *Nature* and *Science*. She now heads an organization called the Genetic Alliance, and a research consortium on PXE that is conducting clinical trials on a cocktail of possible treatments for the disease. (Her children are now in their thirties.)

In 2013, Dana Lewis, a twenty-five-year-old with Type 1 diabetes who had no engineering or medical background, was trying to figure out how to make the alarms louder on the glucose monitor she used at night, so that she wouldn't sleep through them. Lewis, who worked in public relations and lived in Seattle, started collaborating with a software engineer she was dating, Scott Leibrand, and they developed an algorithm that predicted when her glucose levels would fall dangerously low at night. Eventually, they came up with a more ambitious device that precluded the need to get up out of bed and inject insulin. They called it an Open Artificial Pancreas System and posted instructions for making one online. The device linked up glucose sensors, open-source software that could run on a smartphone, and an insulin pump, allowing patients to automatically calibrate dosing through the night. Though the Open Artificial Pancreas System is not an approved medical device, and no company manufactures one commercially, more than seventeen hundred people have assembled their own. Initial review studies, in *The Lancet* and other journals, have shown it to be effective.

e-NABLE, an international collective of thirty thousand volunteers, designs and 3-D-prints prosthetic hands and arms, then gives them to people at no cost—more than ten thousand so far. (Most operating expenses are absorbed by the volunteers.) In the U.S., many recipients are children. Kids sometimes stop using medical-grade prosthetic devices because they are quite heavy and aren't supposed to get wet or dirty. Children also quickly outgrow prostheses, and not all families can afford to keep buying new ones, especially if insurance doesn't cover enough of the cost, which ranges between three thousand and ten thousand dollars. And no company produces a prosthesis for kids with a rare congenital condition in which they have a palm but no fingers. Jen Owen, one of the founders of e-NABLE, told me that, for many children, the primary benefit of a 3-D-printed prosthesis is "psychosocial"—you can go from being the kid with a weird hand to the kid with a superhero hand that peers are curious about in a good way. e-NABLE volunteers make plastic hands in colors of their clients' choosing—sometimes eye-catching blue or purple. Peregrine Hawthorn, who was born without fingers on one hand, got his first e-NABLE prosthesis as a teenager, and then started designing new models with his father. Hawthorn, in an article he co-wrote in 2017, "Cyborg Pride: Self-Design in e-NABLE," said that making his own prostheses had helped him fight off depression. He recalled how excited he'd been to show off his first design, which was "glossy black with bright-blue actuation cables."

In other parts of the world, recipients are often people who can't afford any kind of prosthesis. Jon Schull, an e-NABLE co-founder who was formerly an Internet entrepreneur and a professor at the Rochester Institute of Technology, told me that he recently met two young men in Honduras who had lost their hands in electrical accidents, and had been out of work until they got e-NABLE hands. One now ran a houseplant business, and the other sold sandals. They told Schull that they could finally hold a child's hand on a walk, or gesticulate freely when telling a story, or fist-bump their friends. "Hands are social tools even more than manipulative ones," Schull said. Seen in this light, it doesn't matter that e-NABLE hands aren't state-of-the-art. The job of professional prostheses-makers, he said, is "to produce something really good, and if it's merely better than nothing it's not good enough"—but, in some circumstances, something *is* better than nothing.

Schull told me that, although he wasn't paid for his time at e-NABLE, it was the most satisfying work he'd ever done. Not only was there the "visual and emotional appeal of giving prosthetics to people"; he was fascinated by how a highly decentralized group of humanitarians had been "able to circumvent the medical-industrial-academic complex and address needs that complex has proved incapable of solving."

In part because e-NABLE doesn't pay designers or charge recipients, it has not been subject to F.D.A. oversight of medical devices. And, though some prosthesis manufacturers resent its incursion into their market, the volunteers have been able to work largely unimpeded.

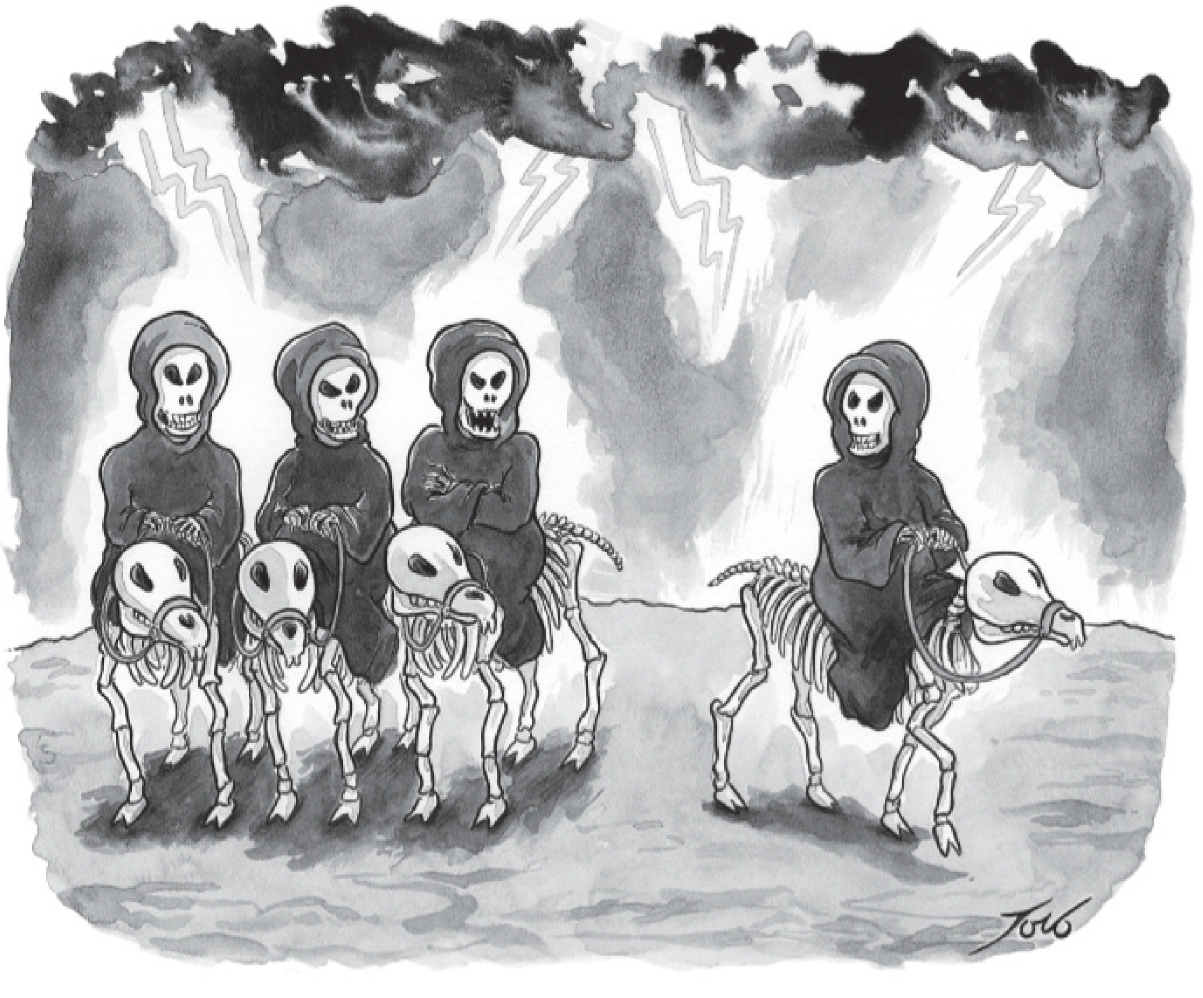
e-NABLE has a whimsical origin story. Jen Owen was married to a man named Ivan Owen, a nerdy, mild-mannered artist and designer in Seattle who sometimes worked on monster suits for low-budget horror films. He and Jen were into cosplay, and, in 2011, for a steampunk convention, he made an outsized metal hand with moving fingers that made a sound like a thief rustling in a silverware drawer. The cosplay crowd loved it—it reminded them, depending on their temperaments, of Freddy Krueger or Edward Scissorhands. A carpenter in South Africa named Richard Van As spotted a video that Ivan had posted and saw a bigger purpose for such craft. Van As had recently lost four fingers on his right hand and couldn't afford professional prostheses. The two men began a long-distance collaboration by e-mail and Skype. Eventually, the Owens and Van As posted videos about *that* project, and started receiving requests for prostheses from people around the world.

In 2012, they hit on the idea of using 3-D printers to make hands. At the time, such devices cost thousands of dollars. (Now you can get a good one for about three hundred.) Owen asked a company called MakerBot if it would consider sending him a few printers for free. To his surprise, the answer was yes. Instead of patenting their designs, the Owens, Van As, and other collaborators released their files into the public domain, allowing anyone who wanted to make—or modify—prosthetic limbs based on their models to do so. (To become a certified e-NABLE maker, you must record a video of yourself printing a hand, so that experienced volunteers can evaluate your process and your final product.)

Volunteers submit proposals for new designs and projects, and the community votes whether or not to fund them with grant money. Nate Munro, of Littleton, Colorado, recently got a grant to design an arm that he called the NIOP, for No-Insurance-Optimized-Prosthetic. In 2015, Munro had been fixing up a little pink bike for a friend's daughter, and when he tested it out—"riding it like a clown"—he popped the front wheel over a crack in the cement, fell, and broke his arm in several places. At the time, Munro, an independent contractor, had no health insurance and little savings, so he never got proper care for his arm. An infection developed and, in 2017, the arm was amputated just below the elbow. He told the e-NABLE newsletter, "I was living in a first-world country for people with insurance but a developing country for those without insurance." Munro eventually got a professional prosthesis, but the year he spent waiting for it—"when every destination you go to is packed with people that make you feel like a freak"—stuck with him. When he heard about e-NABLE, he joined and started making arms for others, including one for a fourteen-year-old boy in Aleppo, Syria, who had lost an arm up to the shoulder.

One afternoon, I went to see Eric Bubar, an e-NABLE volunteer who teaches physics at Marymount University, in Arlington, Virginia. He showed me the 3-D printer that he and his students use to make hands, and the spaghetti-like plastic filaments that are fed into it. It takes fifteen to twenty hours to print all the parts of a hand, and about half an hour for Bubar to assemble them. I spoke with him as the printer hummed, squeezing out purple plastic in tight rotations, like a miniature Zamboni machine. After it stopped, he handed me a child-size plastic thumb. I put it in my coat pocket, as a keepsake.

One good thing about being a leaderless "do-ocracy"—the word e-NABLE volunteers use to describe their movement—is that priorities can shift quickly. When COVID-19 went global, e-NABLE volunteers began producing face shields. Eric Bubar had three 3-D printers running at all times, filling dozens of requests a day for up to a hundred shields—from hospitals, assisted-living facilities, dentists' offices. Bubar, like other e-NABLE volunteers, solicited feedback from the recipients and then adapted his designs in response. When doctors told him that they would prefer a shield made with the kind of plastic used in overhead transparencies—it was lighter and easier to clean—he began offering that. The e-NABLE Web site posted one photograph after another of medical workers wearing the group's face shields and giving thumbs-ups. Collectively,



"Stop being selfish. There's no 'I' in the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse."

e-NABLE has distributed more than fifty thousand face shields in more than twenty-five countries.

e-NABLE wasn't alone in its efforts. After it became clear that a shortage of flexible plastic nasal swabs was one of the bottlenecks slowing down COVID-19 testing, other D.I.Y. groups started 3-D-printing them. As impressive as this outpouring of altruism was, there was understandable concern that some products might not be safe or effective. Fortunately, efforts to review and test D.I.Y. products for fighting COVID-19 have emerged almost as fast as the products themselves. For a forthcoming special issue of the journal *HardwareX*, which is published by Elsevier, Joshua Pearce, an engineering professor at Michigan Technological University, put out a call for articles on low-cost, open-source COVID-19 medical equipment. Publication in the journal would mean that a design had been tested and validated; given the urgency of the situation, the peer review would be done quickly, and the articles would be open access. It wasn't the same as F.D.A. approval, but it was a serious attempt to impose rigor on the movement. Pearce told me, "With medical hardware, it's not good enough to say, 'I did something.' You need proof that it's good enough if you're going to risk somebody's life using it."

Since the COVID-19 crisis began, lab work at Open Insulin has been on hold, but project members have stayed busy working on the legal and social aspects of their mission. Even if Open Insulin begins producing a consistent product, it will have to overcome all kinds of regulatory obstacles to demonstrate safety and purity before taking it to market. Manufacturers of pharmacy-grade medications must provide the F.D.A. with reams of evidence that they can produce the substances with complete consistency, in sterile environments. Proving this level of proficiency can cost millions of dollars.

Open Insulin's task may be made a little easier by a new F.D.A. rule that spells out conditions for making "biosimilars" to therapeutics such as insulin. Kelly Hills, the bioethicist, told me, "If Open Insulin can show that what they're doing is biosimilar to something already on the market, they might be able to go through the approval path faster and wouldn't have to go through the entire clinical-trial process, which is where much of the money is required."

Open Insulin members have been getting legal advice on how they could structure their production network. In addition to partnering with hospitals and pharmacies, one model being considered is that of California's cannabis coöperatives—which are regulated by the state, not by the federal government.

The COVID-19 testing shortage has made some Open Insulin members think that their vision of a network of small production facilities could be applied to the larger medical-supply chain. Pharmaceutical plants are optimized for producing on a mass scale, and, as Open Insulin points out on its Web site, "it is a very slow and costly procedure to add capacity or change to making a different product." A system of numerous small plants, each producing medicine for local clients, would be far more flexible.

Like so many people these days, the group's volunteers are finding inspiration in stories of people who weathered past public-health crises, and they've found a good one to tell about insulin. In 1940, a nineteen-year-old Czech Jew named Eva Saxl fled Nazi-occupied Prague with her husband, Viktor. They made it to Shanghai, where Eva, an English teacher, was given a diagnosis of Type 1 diabetes. The city was under a Japanese blockade, and medicine was hard to come by. Eva acquired a textbook that described the pioneering experiments treating diabetics and began studying it intensively. She traded stockings that she had knit for a steady supply of water-buffalo pancreases; soon, she was producing purified insulin. The Saxls tested the product in rabbits, after which Eva injected it in herself. They shared their insulin with four hundred others.

Not long ago, Jean Peccoud, the synthetic biologist at Colorado State, co-authored a paper about Open Insulin. He told me that he found the project's approach "refreshing," but had concluded that it was not best applied to a drug as widely used as insulin. He thought that Open Insulin's ideas could be most helpful for "orphan drugs with a very small market, where it might be difficult for a company to justify producing a commercial drug." In such a scenario, "there could be small-scale manufacturing with no commercial transaction between drug company and patient, and thus no liability exposure. That could be the right environment for patients to produce their drugs in conditions that may not be quite as safe as what they could be getting from a drug company but much safer than not getting the drug at all."

Ultimately, the pandemic may help the D.I.Y.-bio movement gain legitimacy. In an e-mail, Will Canine, the creator of the liquid-dispensing robots, said, "While the President seems to be doing D.I.Y. bio all wrong, professional scientists are behaving a lot more like D.I.Y. biologists now than they were a few months ago. . . . Experimental data and protocols are being published and maintained openly—secrecy and hoarding are being shamed rather than justified."

Ellen Jorgensen, the GenSpace co-founder, sees the pandemic as an occasion for the kind of openness and coöperation in science that the D.I.Y.-bio movement has championed. A professional system that has always rewarded scientists on the basis of publishing, patents, and competition is adapting fast: disseminating papers before they have gone through a formal peer review, sharing materials, making designs for medical equipment open source. This is "evidence in favor of more open science," she said, adding, "That's the hope that a lot of us have—that there will be some permanent good that will result from this terrible tragedy of the pandemic. And part of that might be the institutions of science breaking down barriers and having more open scientific communication, which leads to an acceleration of scientific progress—and the betterment of humankind." ♦

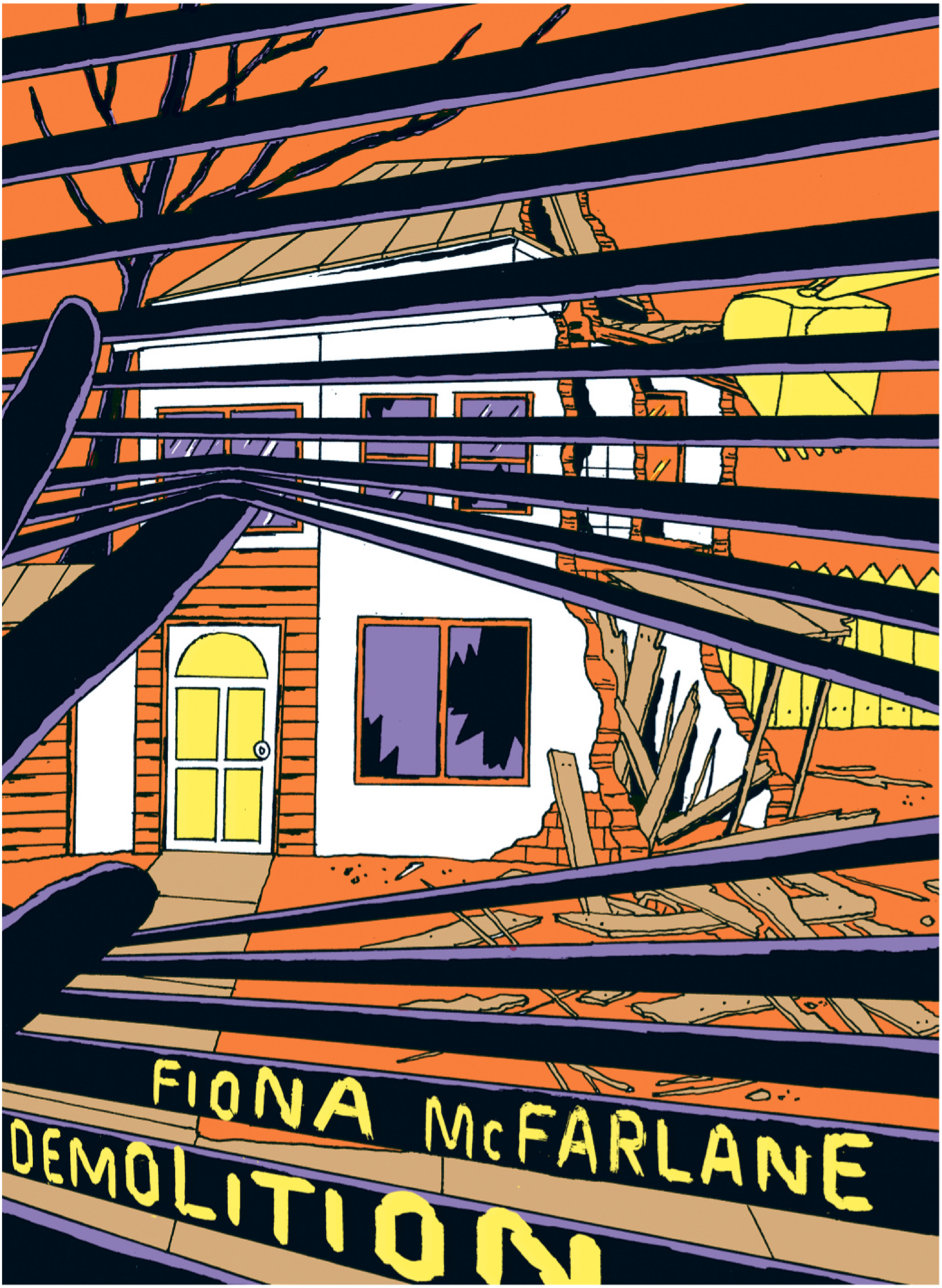

FIONA McFARLANE
DEMOLITION

ILLUSTRATION BY ANNA HAIFISCH

"The Biga house is coming down," Gerald said. "Finally." He took the tray from Eva's lap.

"That lovely house," Eva said.

With a finger, Gerald lifted one slat of the horizontal blinds. He held the tray in his other hand and peered out the window. "What's lovely about it?" he said, and the tray tilted.

"Gerald!" Eva called, and he righted the tray without looking at her. "The Japanese maple with the crimson leaves."

"They dug it up already," Gerald said. "Worth a fortune, a tree like that."

Eva wheeled herself to the window.

"I'll pull the blinds," Gerald said, but he went away first, into the kitchen with the tray, and, until he came back, she studied the dust on the edges of the blinds—the very thin rim of it. But who could fault Gerald, who was tremendous with the housework and had said, "What's wrong with curtains? Blinds'll only catch the dust," and still let her have them installed? Now he came back and leaned over the couch the way you had to and fiddled with the strings until the blinds were open just enough for Eva to see the Biga house.

"So many cars," she said, and Gerald snorted.

A man approached the Biga house and stopped at the front gate. He said something to the workmen inside the fence, and, when they answered him, he turned to the letter box—an ordinary metal letter box—and, with one sure movement, wrenched it off its post. Then he cradled it against his stomach the way you might a heavy watermelon and carried it to a car parked down the street.

"Souvenir," Gerald said. "Sickos."

But he stayed at the window to watch for the excavator. When it came around the corner, the doors of the cars parked on the street all opened up, and people rose out of them. They held cameras and camcorders, and they wore clothes in muted colors, like the ones you see on TV journalists in war zones. That was what Eva thought of. As if they wanted to hide themselves. And all there to watch that little house come down. Eva had been a girl inside that house, visiting the Laineys. And, after the Laineys moved to Sydney, she had seen tenants come and go, the shutters loosen and tighten, the maple tree's red turn on and off each year. Some tenants had raked the leaves, and others hadn't. Some of her students had lived there with their families, and there had been nights when the windows were lit and music came out of them, and fatty smoke from grilling lamb chops. Christmas trees in the front window. So many women standing at the gate, calling children's names. And sometimes pets—the Bigas themselves had had a dog, and later Paul Biga had all those birds. All of that, today, would go.

The street was getting crowded now. Workers in hard hats called out for people to stay back, and along came Jim Grant, who still looked, in his police uniform, like a big, red-cheeked tenth grader. Behind him was a woman Eva thought she knew, a short woman in a navy suit, who seemed almost superstitiously not to look toward the Biga house—and, yes, it was their house, Eva and Gerald's, that she was looking at, their gate she opened, their path she stepped onto.

"Who's this, then?" Gerald said. He liked to get to the door before a visitor. He was so large he filled the entire doorway—Eva knew how wonderful it was to see him waiting there, with his big voice calling "Welcome!," and how imposing he was if he withheld the welcome. She rolled back across the room to her usual place and listened to him say hello, and he was gracious as he said it; his tone was affable. So he approved of the short woman, and would admit her.

"You've got a visitor," he said, coming back in from the hallway.

The woman was the type who put her head around the door before she entered a room: here was her head, light hair, sharp nose, and now here was her body. Was it to conceal her shortness? Eva understood these strategies; she didn't like people to see her wheelchair before they saw her face.

"Hello, Mrs. Forsythe," the woman said, bending to kiss Eva's cheek, perhaps because Eva had lifted her face.

"This is a Miss Kate Hawkins," Gerald said. "Says you're old mates."

"Oh, no!" the woman said. She wore a bag across her body—it flattened one breast. "I mean—I wonder if you remember me?"

"One of your old students, love?" Gerald said.

But Eva knew now who she was: she was the woman who'd written the book about Paul Biga. Her hair was lighter, but otherwise she looked the same.

"I might pop out," Gerald said. "If you ladies are all right? See how old Terry's getting on."

Terry, Eva could see—Terry Jarrett, next-door-neighbor Terry, with whom Gerald was at war but only on Monday evening, garbage night—was standing on his lawn to watch the Biga house come down. So Gerald went and joined him, and there they stood—Gerald Forsythe and Terry Jarrett, legs apart, arms crossed high on their chests, as if they were supervising the demolition. Which could now proceed.

The short woman waited while Eva watched Gerald. Then she said, "Perhaps you don't remember, Mrs. Forsythe. We spoke some years ago, here in this room, about Paul Biga."

"Yes, I remember," Eva said. "But was that years ago?"

"It was 1995. November."

"Well, goodness, years!" Eva said.

"I was writing a book. Did you ever receive a copy? I gave the publisher your address."

"You know, I think we did." Eva gestured at the bookshelf and Kate Hawkins, unexpectedly, walked toward it, and there, as if by magic, was the book. Kate pulled it off the shelf and handed it to Eva: a black jacket, red letters. Eva held it out, away from her face, until she could read it. "Hunter on the Highway: The True Story of a Monster Among Us." The cover was a closeup of Paul's adult face.

Kate Hawkins said, "It's all right if you never read it. I wouldn't blame you." She seemed uncertain, standing there in stripes of light—the blinds—with the Biga house behind her. "And now I'm working on an article—five years later, looking back, and the house coming down. How have people coped? How has the town changed? Or not? Where are we now? That type of thing. Because it was all so raw back then."

Eva remembered, now, how much this woman had talked at first—how tentative it made her seem, how rueful, until, in putting her at ease, you found that you had talked too much yourself. Eva recognized this trick because she'd used it many times—not so much on her students as on their parents.

"How about some tea?" Eva said, moving toward the kitchen so that Kate Hawkins couldn't ask or make some gesture that would mean "Can you manage?" or "Let me do that for you." Eva was handy in the kitchen; she could make a pot of tea and set some biscuits on a plate. Gerald put everything she needed in the lower cupboards.

"What have you been up to since I saw you last?" Eva asked, deliberately chatty among the mugs and tea bags.

"Oh, this and that," Kate Hawkins said. "A lot of articles, another book."

"More murders?" Still in her brisk, deliberately oblivious voice.

"Yes, a matricide," Kate said, quite casual, and then, "It's pretty awful, really, that murder pays my bills."

"I wouldn't say 'awful.' Could you carry the tray, dear?"

Kate Hawkins, with the tray, followed Eva back into the lounge room. She set the tray on the coffee table and perched on the edge of the couch, exactly as she had five years ago. "What I wanted first of all," she said, "was to apologize for coming so soon after Paul's arrest."

"You did come rather quickly," Eva said.

"I only had a month. It had to be the first book out—payment was double if I was first."

"And was it quite a lot?"

"It was," Kate said. She didn't, now, seem ashamed. "Down payment on a house."

"Good," Eva said. And it was good—to turn a murderer into a house. What a clever thing. She picked up Kate's book, with Paul's face on it.

Kate blew at the steam above her tea. "Journalists get so used to barging in. To be perfectly honest, I saw you simply as an opportunity—neighbor, school principal, employer. Your garden's looking lovely, by the way."

"That's all Gerald, now that he's retired," Eva said. "No need to pay anyone to do it for us."

"I wanted to say—I wanted to apologize, but also to say what an impression you made on me when we spoke, Mrs. Forsythe."

"You must call me Eva. You did before."

"Thank you. Perhaps you won't remember, but I asked if you had children and you said no. A few minutes later, you wanted to change your answer. Do you remember?"

Eva shook her head. What had she said to anybody, years ago?

"You said, 'I was a teacher and a principal. That's how I had my children.'"

Ceci n'est pas une pipe
m.e. mcnair

"I can't wait to see it."

"I was and I did," Eva said. She'd made this statement a number of times, to different people. Maybe it had seemed clever at first, or deeply felt, or simply dutiful—it didn't surprise her to hear that she'd said it to this journalist. "I had all of them."

"I wanted you to know how much that moved me," Kate Hawkins said. "I think of it often. My daughter is in second grade."

A fearsome noise began outside.

"Goodness, what a racket," Eva said. She noticed that she was rubbing her thumb against Paul's shiny face on the book jacket.

"What does it mean to you that the Biga house is finally being demolished?"

"Are we onto the official interview now?"

Kate Hawkins laughed. "May I record our conversation?" She produced a Dictaphone from her bag.

Gerald would disapprove of this, just as he'd disapproved of "Hunter on the Highway" and of all the people who had come to gawk, even years after Paul's arrest, at the Biga house; who'd taken photos and plant cuttings, who'd knocked on doors, who'd left tributes to the people he'd killed, and parked badly in the street. Gerald would have had the Biga house demolished just to get some peace; he'd threatened, once, to set it on fire, and been annoyed with her for crying as if he'd meant it. Gerald had called her sentimental, but Eva didn't think she was. Maybe she would feel differently if Paul had brought his victims to the house; and maybe she wouldn't. There was something in that house, quite aside from Paul, that should persist.

"Yes," Eva said. "You can record. What was the question?"

"How do you feel about the Biga house being demolished?"

Eva placed "Hunter on the Highway" face down on the coffee table beside her mug of tea. There was a photo of Kate on the back, looking softly pretty in a pink shirt.

"Well, first of all," Eva said, "it isn't the Biga house. It's the Lainey house."

"Lainey?"

"The Lainey family. L-a-i-n-e-y. Mr. Lainey built it in the early twenties, a year before my father built this place. They've rented it out for years and years—since, let me think, 1946. Yes, I was sixteen. The Bigas were the Laineys' longest tenants—more than twenty years. You know, this isn't a tenant kind of town. It's a town where people die and then their children live in their houses. So people were funny about that house, about everyone who lived there, though by the end most people forgot that the Bigas didn't own. They took good care of it, the Lainey house."

Maybe no one else in town still referred to it as the Lainey house; Gerald certainly didn't. But when Jan Biga and his wife, Lucinda, and their boy, Paul, had moved in, it was to the Lainey house. "I hear there's a Pole moved in to the Laineys'," Gerald said, and Eva thought at first he meant a pole, a post. He meant, of course, a Polish man. How literal she was about the Lainey house. It was as if she couldn't absorb the changes that had taken place there: the Laineys leaving, Josie Lainey waving goodbye from the back window of their car; the tenants moving in and out; the Japanese maple turning its intricate red; the Bigas arriving, and teenage Paul crossing the road to work in the Forsythes' garden for seven dollars an hour. Last time Kate Hawkins had come, just after Paul's arrest, she'd asked about those gardening days. Had Eva ever noticed anything unusual about him—anything that might have given an indication of the monster he turned out to be? Oh, no, Eva said, a quiet boy, and so polite you'd never dream—that kind of thing. She remembered later that, when Paul had come to do the garden the first time, she'd noticed the length of his fingernails. He used to pinch caterpillars out of the gardenias with those long nails. Was that a sign of anything? But Paul was only ever a sign of himself.

"It's hard to think of it as a family home," Kate said.

"Not for me," Eva said.

Mrs. Lainey at the gate calling, "Josie! Josie!," her hands caught up in her apron; ham on the Lainey table; hands swatting at flies all through the saying of grace, the laziness of lunchtime flies, the slowness of hands during grace, and Josie's foot pressing Eva's under the table; the organ in the front room with its odd, resisting pedals, Mr. Lainey playing it with a bottle of beer beside him on the stool and Josie turning the pages of the music; Eva holding the baby while Mrs. Lainey hung the washing, thick white drool staining Eva's arm and her never minding, Josie sulking at how much Eva loved the baby; Josie asking, "Would you save Harry Cox if his house was on fire? Would you save Norman Monk?," running through all the boys in their class, "Would you save John McInnes, Gerald Forsythe? Would you save Michael Byrne?"; Josie walking the brick fence wearing a yellow dress and red lipstick; Josie, Josie, Josie.

Kate Isenberg

"Damn. Nothing but packaging."

Kate waited for a particularly loud burst of noise to pass. Then she said, "And how do the Laineys feel about having had Paul Biga as a tenant?"

Josie Lainey throwing a cricket ball at her brother, missing, laughing, dodging when he threw it back.

"I don't know," Eva said. "We lost touch. I can't imagine they like it. Of course, Mr. and Mrs. Lainey were gone well before—well, everything."

"When did they die?"

"In the late seventies, I believe, or early eighties."

Mrs. Lainey and Josie in the front room—the formal room, which no one ever used—sitting on the stuffy sofa, holding hands, their faces very white. Mr. Lainey saying, "All right, Evelyn, you'd better go on home now," and closing the door very softly.

And Eva in the hallway, sobbing without making any sound.

Kate Hawkins asked, "How many children in the Lainey family?"

"Three."

"Their names?"

Josephine, Michael, Margaret.

"Oh," Eva said, "I wouldn't be

PANDEMIC PLAYHOUSE
Wow! Look at all those people!
Yeah! And they're all walking somewhere!
Maybe they're going to the subway.
Or a RESTAURANT!
Oooooooooooooooooooh...

comfortable. They won't want their names associated."

"I understand," Kate said, and wrote a few words in her notebook. I suppose, Eva thought, she'll simply look it up or ask someone else. If she were my student, I'd want her to be canny and resourceful.

Kate took a sip of her tea. "So, they built the house in the early twenties, and they left in—when did you say? 1946? Just after the war. They'd lived there for at least twenty years. Why did they move?"

There had never been a face, or lips, or arms more beautiful to Eva than Josie Lainey's. Not even Gerald, whom she had loved and desired for years, had ever lain like Josie in a bed, as if there were no clear distinction between her body and the warmth, the softness, the sweetness of the sheets.

"Mr. Lainey got a job in Sydney."

"What kind of work did he do?"

The noise of the demolition increased—that was the front door opening—and was muffled again. Gerald arrived in the lounge room, rubbing his hands.

"Might take a photo or two," he said.

"Is it already down?" Eva asked. Her heart was beating very fast.

"Front rooms are down," Gerald said, hurrying through to his study. "Bedrooms to go. They certainly know how to get the job done, once they've put their minds to it."

Josie Lainey's bedroom, done all in pink (Josie eventually too old for this, rolling her eyes, not a baby anymore), had become Paul's. And Eva wondered, sometimes, if there had been some residue left in that room, some trace of Eva and Josie. It wasn't the kind of thing she ordinarily considered. But it would be one way to explain, wouldn't it, the letter Paul had sent?

"Are you tired, Eva?" Kate asked. Her face was creased with concern; Eva didn't trust it.

"Not at all," Eva said. But she was tired. "What was your last question?"

"What kind of job did Mr. Lainey move to Sydney for?"

Gerald erupted from his study carrying his chunky little camera. "He didn't move for a job, did he?" he said. "Wasn't it some kind of family drama? That's what I heard. They certainly left pretty quick smart."

"A drama?" Kate said, sitting up straighter on the edge of the couch.

"It was definitely a job," Eva said. "He worked in insurance. He'd been a salesman, and he was promoted to head office."

Gerald tilted his head from side to side. "Evie would know," he said, then launched into the hallway and out the front door. The sound of the demolition rose with the opened door, then receded again.

"You were close to the Laineys?" Kate asked.

Eva said, "The older daughter was in my class at school."

"The same school you went on to become principal of?"

"The high school, yes, but we started kindergarten together."

"The same school Paul Biga attended," Kate said.

"The high school, yes," Eva said. "Eventually."

"Paul was at the school for years eleven and twelve," Kate said, and Eva nodded. "Did you often hire your students to work for you?"

Eva looked at the photo of younger Kate on the back of "Hunter on the Highway." Her chin was resting on her left hand, and she wore a wedding ring. She wasn't wearing one now. Eva hadn't read the book, but she'd flipped through it to see if her name came up. She occupied three sentences; the implication had been that she, in her provincial naïveté, had been hoodwinked by Paul's calculated charm. To spend twenty years living opposite a monster without recognizing his evil might, Eva supposed, require a special kind of delusion. Others in town had been very quick to say that there was always something off about him.

"My students? No," Eva said. "We

hired Paul as a neighbor, more than as a student. A neighborhood boy."

"He was seventeen when he started," Kate said, as if riffling through mental files. "And he came every day?"

"I thought we were talking about the Lainey house," Eva said. She wanted Gerald to come back now, to fill the door frame, and to drive the woman from the house with his forceful conviviality.

"We are," Kate said. "Did Paul work in his parents' garden, too?"

"He spent a lot of time out at the aviary," Eva said. "The Laineys built the aviary."

Josie with a cockatoo on her head, the cockatoo screaming, "Give us a kiss! Give us a kiss!"

"The Laineys kept birds?"

"Yes. A sulfur-crested cockatoo."

"Just the one? Did they take it with them when they moved?"

"To Sydney? No," Eva said. "They set it free. It lived in the garden for months, then eventually it was gone."

"And did any of the other tenants keep birds in the aviary?"

"No," Eva said. "Only Paul."

Paul bringing her, shyly, a glossy offering of magpie feathers; Eva saying, "Oh, my mother would have used these to trim a hat," and then not knowing what to do with them, so they lived in a mug beside the telephone for more than a year. Little black-and-white pennants.

"It was still in good shape, then?" Kate asked. "The aviary? If the Bigas came in '75, it hadn't been used for nearly thirty years."

"Paul repaired it," Eva said. Gerald had helped him. Gerald had always been handy. He'd wanted children.

"So, gardening at your house, but birds at home," Kate said. "Did he come every day?"

"We couldn't have afforded for him to come every day."

"Your neighbors," Kate said, "on this side"—she pointed in the direction of the Jarrett house, Terry Jarrett of the sloppy garbage bins—"remember him coming nearly every day."

Well, yes, there had been a summer when he came most days, without asking for extra payment. You would look out a window and see him deadheading the daisies, or you'd hear a sound and it would be Paul sweeping the front path. If you opened the door and offered him a cup of tea, he always said no. There was only one task he refused, and that was killing stinkbugs. It was Eva who had picked the stinkbugs off the kumquats by hand and dropped them in a jar of methylated spirits. Gerald had offered to spray, but she didn't want chemicals on the fruit trees, and Paul was too disgusted to touch the stinkbugs, even with gloves on (Paul, who would allow spiders on his bare palms and throw snails hard against the fence to crack their shells and keep them out of her irises). But Eva had been fascinated, had noted the frantic waving of the stinkbugs' striped antennae, had made herself dizzy with the fumes of metho and stink that rose from the jar, had watched as valiant bugs pulled themselves to apparent safety on rafts made of other bugs until she tilted the jar, creating terrible tsunamis. The jar was full of clinging death and gave her great satisfaction. The kumquat tree, no longer under attack, had put forth fruit and blossom and been visited by bees; the marmalade Gerald had made (an excellent maker of jams, Gerald) was delicious spread on toast or on thick slices of Cheddar cheese. She had dumped the bodies of the bugs in the garden and, after the alcohol evaporated, the ants had made feasts of the softer flesh.

"Four hours a week," Eva said. "Usually on Saturday mornings. That's what we paid him for. But haven't I already told you everything I can about Paul? I didn't know him well, especially once he grew up. The Bigas moved in their own circle."

"Of course," Kate said. "But living across the road—" She gestured toward the window, where Eva had avoided looking. Through the half-open blinds, she saw a yellow machine clambering over the rubble that used to be the front room of the Lainey house. The windows in that room had been set with small squares of stained glass; she and Josie used to find it funny, in the afternoons, to lie on the floor so that the squares of blue and red light fell on their chests, exactly where their breasts would one day be. The tender pucker of Josie's breasts. Looking back on that last year with Josie—1945 and into 1946—Eva marvelled at how chaste they'd been, how pure. Even their kisses, full of heat, had been wholesome. The stained-glass windows had been removed before the demolition.

What Kate meant, of course, was that you learn things about people when you live so close to them, even if you don't spend time together. That you notice things, without meaning to—surely you notice things. Nobody wanted to believe Eva when she said that Paul Biga had seemed like a perfectly ordinary boy. And he had, although one of the things Eva had learned as a teacher and a principal was that there are no perfectly ordinary adolescents, that each of them is strange, and bewildered, and in mourning, because they're all in exile from their childhoods, just as they always longed to be. There had been only one thing that marked Paul Biga as unusual, and Eva had never told it to anyone—not even Gerald. At the end of that summer when he'd come to the garden every day, Paul had written Eva a letter on those thin sheets of paper—so thin that if your hands were even a little damp the paper became translucent or tore, the paper that people used when they were sending letters overseas and wanted to keep the weight down. The things he said he'd planned for them: a farm, and horses, an aviary, of course, and, because he knew she loved the maple tree in his front garden, he would dig it up to bring with them, he would plant it outside their bedroom window and every night he would, and she would, and then he would, and would, and would—

How detailed he was—her cunt, her arse, her tits—how well he spelled when he spelled her body out, and how lonely that seemed, to spell "cunnilingus" right and "specific" wrong. In what film, what TV show had he seen the farm with the gentle, sexual, older wife, or learned about love letters, so that he could approximate one now, for her? What was the sign he'd wanted her to give him? A candle in the window, or something just as ludicrous—as if Gerald wouldn't have noticed a candle! As if a candle in the window wouldn't catch the curtains on fire and burn down the house, as if someone walking along the street wouldn't see a candle in the Forsythe window with the lights all off and think, I'd better knock on the door. They've gone to bed with a candle burning. And the terror, then, lying in bed, that he would come anyway, would be a candle himself waiting at the door, coming into the house, standing over her in the bedroom. Would you save Eva Forsythe if her house was on fire?

She could have told someone, told Gerald or spoken to Paul or to his father, but she hadn't. That had been irresponsible of her, she knew, but Paul had just graduated from school, his mother was very ill that summer, and the letter was so passionate, so precise, that she worried that anyone reading it would assume she'd encouraged him. She convinced Gerald that they no longer needed Paul in the garden; she pretended not to see Paul if she passed him in the supermarket, though she still waved at Jan Biga if they were both out on the street. Glancing into their windows, she saw the blue TV, the yellow wallpaper, the paintings crooked on the wall after Lucinda died. The maple tree dressed and undressed, blazing up and down again, while Paul—quiet behind the curtains—grew older, stronger, better-looking, began spending time with girls his own age, acted civil behind his father's lawnmower on Sundays, as if there had never been a letter, as if she had imagined it. She had torn the letter into hundreds of pieces, placed those pieces in an envelope, taped the envelope shut, and concealed it in a box of cereal, which went into the bin and was collected early one Tuesday morning. She listened to the garbage truck trundle up and down the street, Gerald snoring, Terry carrying out his bin in a last-minute panic, and all the birds in Paul's aviary greeting the pretty dawn.

Kate, on the couch, her hand still pointing to the house across the road, waited with a look of bright expectation on her face, as if she had offered an extra serving of cake and was watching to see if Eva would be greedy enough to accept it. Imagine her glee if Eva were to say, "There was one strange thing. Paul wrote me a letter." Imagine her looking at her second-grade daughter and remembering Eva saying, "I had my children" and thinking, then, of the letter.

"I know it's dull of me," Eva said. "But, really, they were a very quiet family."

Outside, the people watching the demolition began to applaud—not the way they might at the end of a football match but as they did when one of the Sydney orchestras visited on a regional tour and the townspeople felt obliged to attend the concert. There was liberation in the applause, but also deflation—as if the spectators had expected rapture and, once again, been disappointed.

"That must be the last wall down," Kate said.

It felt to Eva as if the whole life of the Lainey house would now be on display to the world; as if everyone who had ever lived in it was still there, all at once, going about his or her intimate business, completely unaware that the walls were missing. Like in a doll's house. And in the room that everyone knew had been Paul's, people would see him—what? Making his plans? Dreaming his violent dreams? And they would see Josie and Eva in Josie's little bed, loving each other, very gentle, very pure; they would see Mrs. Lainey opening the door (if there were still doors in the Lainey house) and crying out, the two girls sitting up in bed; and, oh, would they watch as the girls pulled on their summer dresses, as Mrs. Lainey took Josie's hand and led her into the front room, as Mr. Lainey said, "All right, Evelyn, you'd better go on home now"?

"Would you like to go outside and see?" Kate asked.

"Oh, no," Eva said.

"Are you sure?" Kate stood and adjusted the strings to open the blinds even wider. Eva looked again at the photo on the back of the book. Kate's hand was positioned under her chin in a way that made it look as if her head had been impaled on a fleshy spike. But that was unkind.

"Reduced to rubble," Kate said. "How does it feel to know it's down?"

Eva regarded the actual Kate, who had propped one knee on the arm of the couch in order to get closer to the window. Her hair was pulled back into a girlish ponytail and, from behind, her creased navy jacket looked like a school blazer. "Would you be pleased? If you were me?" Eva asked, in the voice she had perfected over years of teaching: affectionately stern, lightly curious, and prepared at all times for disappointment.

"God, yes," Kate said. Then she turned to look at Eva and gave a short, unexpected laugh. "Of course I would."

Now a new house would be built: larger, uglier, and filled with the inexplicable lives of other people.

"You won't have to look at it every day," Kate said.

Josie lying in the heat under the maple tree, balancing an apple on her forehead, saying, "Never getting married, never never." Every freckle like a small, warm sun.

"Anyone would be relieved," Kate said. She laughed a second time and said, "But I can't quote myself. Let me ask you again, how do you feel about the Biga house coming down?"

"The Lainey house," Eva said.

"The Lainey house."

"I feel," Eva said, "completely indifferent."

The front door opened and closed. Gerald and Terry came staggering in, each carrying a milk crate full of bricks that were the liverish-brown color of the Lainey house.

"I'm going to build you an outdoor pizza oven," Gerald said.

Kate turned off her Dictaphone. Terry grinned above his crate, as if he could already feel the heat of the oven. Eva looked at him and thought she wouldn't save him, Terry Jarrett—not even if his house was on fire. ♦

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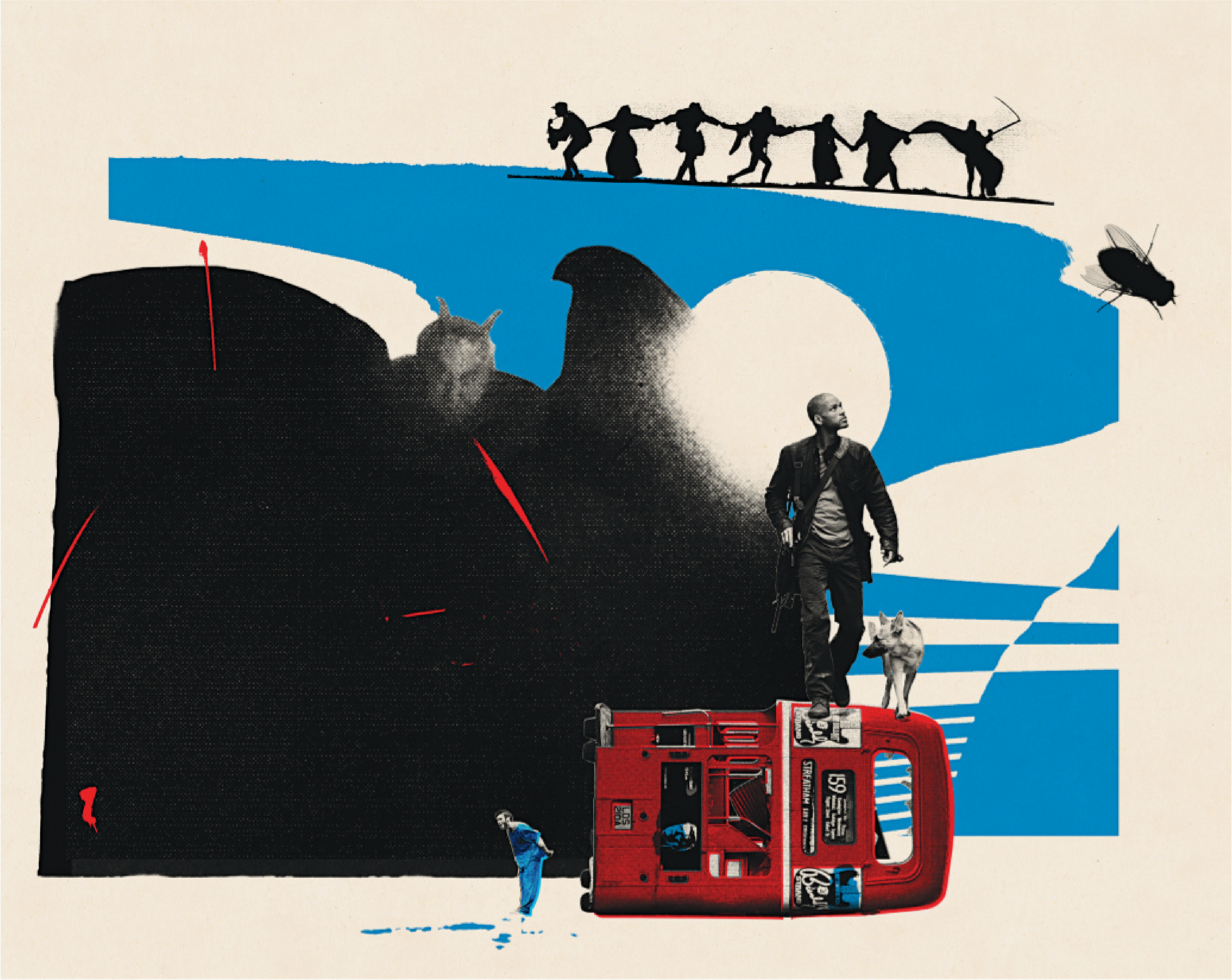
The author on the private lives of houses.

THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

A BUG'S LIFE

Filmmakers love a good plague, but those movies look different now.

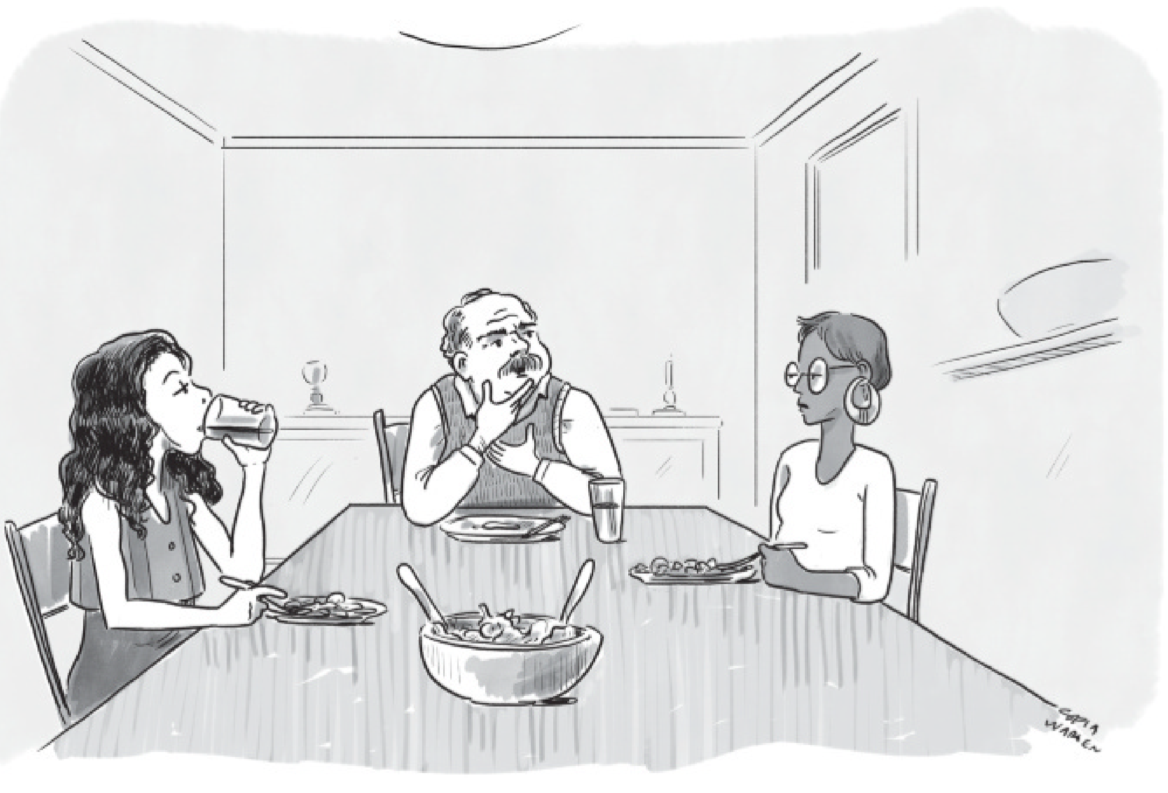
BY ANTHONY LANE

A cough in the darkness. A drop of blood on an airport floor. A visitor from abroad, coming ashore at the docks. A satellite from space, brought back to us with lumps of unidentified material trapped inside. If movies are to be believed, there are all sorts of ways in which a pandemic can start. There is one way, however, more terrifying than any other. One bearer of mass destruction against which there is no defense, and which none of us could ever have foreseen: Emma Thompson.

At first blush, it seems odd that such a smart and liberal-minded woman as Thompson should be the root of all calamity. It's hard to picture her jotting it down on her to-do list: "Eggs. Milk. Global extermination. Shampoo." But there she is, at the beginning of "I Am Legend" (2007), in the role of Dr. Krippin. (The name is a none too subtle warning, given the notoriety of the real Dr. Crippen, who was hanged in England, in 1910, for the murder of his wife.) With a modest smile, the doctor confirms to a TV interviewer that she

Why do we crave fables of sickness when so many of us are sick, or devising ingenious ways to remain non-sick?

ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTIANA COUCEIRO



"That's strange. I remember it differently, in a way that aligns with my world view and casts me in a positive light."

* * *

has, indeed, cured cancer. All that's required, she says, is a touch of bioengineering—some hooey to do with harnessing the measles virus and pointing it in a new and beneficent direction. That, at any rate, is the plan. Regrettably, it goes awry, and the Krippin virus proceeds to do its worst. Within three years, it kills 5.4 billion people, or ninety per cent of the planet's population. On the plus side, lions are doing fine.

Mass extinction is an old favorite among moviemakers. They relish the idea that vast numbers of people will, given judicious marketing, pay good money to watch vast numbers of other people being wiped out. The extinguishing can take many forms. Ornery extraterrestrials come in useful, and earthquakes are a blast, too, as evidenced in "Earthquake" (1974), which was a close contest between seismic activity in Southern California and the firmness of Charlton Heston's jaw. And you can't beat a nice old-fashioned asteroid, although that didn't stop Bruce Willis, in "Armageddon" (1998), from having a crack. In the end, however, nothing gets under our skin, or into the spongy lining of our lungs, like a plague film. Nowhere else do we find so enticing a ratio of frisson to relief. We are pricked with dread as to what could happen to us, in a time of ruination, only to be suffused with existential smugness, later on, as the lights go up and we realize that nothing *has* happened. For now.

The whole genre of fever flicks is having a moment, and the moment has lasted since the start of the year. It was on the final day of 2019 that the first cases of a new disease were reported in China. As the coronavirus has evolved from infancy to its peripatetic prime, it has colonized the human conversation. Whatever your take on the outbreak, you will find a movie to match your point of view. You want origins? Try "Contagion" (2011), whose closing minutes reveal that a Chinese bat gave something nasty to a pig, which gave it to a chef, who gave it to Gwyneth Paltrow, who generously gave it to mankind. Don't fancy the zoonotic theory? You prefer mad scientists, breeding hell in a jar? I propose "12 Monkeys" (1995), in which a lab assistant with a ginger ponytail goes through the Baltimore/Washington airport, bearing flasks of something odorless and merciless. He is off to trot the globe. Too conspiratorial? O.K., let's settle for sane scientists, conscientiously doing their duty, until external forces—thieves deployed by a millionaire, in "The Satan Bug" (1965), or animal liberationists, in "28 Days Later" (2003)—break in. The pathogen is stolen or, infinitely worse, set free.

Some of these scenarios, to be honest, are scarier than others. I soon got bogged down in "The Satan Bug," largely because everybody entering the underground research complex, with its multiple levels of security, keeps having to pause while a sliding glass door goes "*pffsschh*" and the air leaks out of the plot. At the other extreme lies "World War Z" (2013). Miss the first ten minutes of that, and you'd be too late for the initial burst of strife, with terrified Philadelphians fleeing from something—or somebodies—that we can't yet identify. Seldom, thereafter, does the pace relent. We glimpse a screen, at a military command center, that registers "Projected Loss," and it's already at three billion and counting. (Think of the National Debt Clock, off Bryant Park, reconfigured for deaths.) The story requires Brad Pitt, as a former U.N. gofer, to flit between continents in a hectic hunt for a cure, and though much of his quest, in retrospect, could have been conducted via a clever technique known as "phone calls," you're with him all the way. "The biggest cities are the worst off," he is told. "The airlines were the perfect delivery system." Tell me about it.

It could be argued that "World War Z" has *nothing* to tell us, precisely because of the "Z." If I'm asked to nominate a film that might suit, or somehow illuminate, our present plight, my first question is always: "How do you take it? With or without zombies?" Pitt isn't racing around trying to stockpile ventilators, or to sew a handy batch of face masks. He's racing away from people—from those who, once bitten by a zombie, take a few seconds to recompose themselves before jerking back to life, or a crazed facsimile of life, and then swarming to and fro in their hundreds and thousands, seeking whom they may devour. Much the same goes for "28 Days Later" and its sequel, "28 Weeks Later" (2007), in which the infection can, at short notice, transmute even the gentlest soul into a red-eyed ravener, noisily vomiting gore.

Such terrors are not ours. But they are, so to speak, our regular dreads intensified—superheated, speeded up, and luridly lit. We worry about being stuck in bed with a rocketing temperature and drenched pajamas; we worry about our elders, who may be home alone and afraid

PREVIOUS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHS (FROM TOP TO BOTTOM): AF ARCHIVE / ALAMY; MARKO VUCKOVIC / EYEEM / GETTY; TCD / PROD.DB / ALAMY; ENTERTAINMENT PICTURES / ALAMY; AF ARCHIVE / ALAMY

to be visited, or wrestling for breath in the back of an ambulance. Such worries are only natural. Our imaginings, though, defy both nature and reason. They are as rabid as zombies, falling and crawling over themselves to fabricate what comes next. Dreams travel worstward, during a fever, and one job of the movies is to give our dreams, good or bad, a local habitation and a name.

Say, for example, that your habitation is Manhattan, and that you have it pretty much to yourself. Is that an all-consuming nightmare or an opportunity for a spree? The man to ask is Dr. Robert Neville (Will Smith), the lone survivor of the Krippin virus, in "I Am Legend," though not quite as lone as you'd suppose. His companions include Sam, a German shepherd, and an assortment of Dark-seekers—very cross cannibalistic types who emerge at night and can't be relied upon for civilized conversation. No matter. Smith is an enjoyer by instinct, and the movie works best when Neville barrels up and down the city's weed-infested avenues in a scarlet Mustang, or tees up on a rear flap of the A-12 Blackbird, on the deck of the Intrepid, at Pier 86, and practices his swing. "Yeaahh," he says out loud. "I'm gettin' good." A rarity among dystopias, this film has the gall to suggest, however briefly, that the apocalypse might be *fun*.

"I Am Legend," based on the book of the same name, by Richard Matheson, is a thrice-told tale. Before Smith there was Charlton Heston (him again), in "The Omega Man" (1971), and before him there was Vincent Price, in "The Last Man on Earth" (1964). Three more different actors it would be hard to find. Price is the connoisseur of doom, both lofty and aghast; Heston the muscular stalwart, sworn to resist; Smith the life and soul of the party, even when the party consists of nobody but him.

All of which proves that the fantasy of total solitude—which stretches back to Robinson Crusoe, and beyond—takes all sorts. Most of us have wondered, secretly and absurdly, how we would fare if stripped of both conveniences and comrades. (Would I opt for a Maserati over a Mustang, and what year of Château Petrus would I choose to drink as I drove? Or would I simply squirrel away in a basement with a bag of nuts?) Some days, I guess, we'd feel like the musty dregs of the species. On brighter mornings, the immensity of our loss would be soothed by our having outwitted the plague that snapped up everyone else. The last man on earth, by definition, gets to be the best, and thereby to fulfill Sinatra's ambition: "I wanna wake up, in a city that doesn't sleep / And find I'm king of the hill / Top of the heap." Yes, but what a heap.

At the end of January, as the new and confounding virus, bearing some resemblance to the flu, descended on South Korea, I ordered the DVD of a South Korean film from 2013, entitled "Flu." It didn't help much. More than three months later, in the first weekend of May, with much of the world in shackles, the twelfth most popular film on iTunes, just below "Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker," was "Contagion." Huh? Why do we crave fables of sickness when so many of us are sick, or quailing at the prospect of falling sick, or devising ingenious ways to remain non-sick? Can't we spend our days safely slumped on the couch, watching "Leslie Nielsen's Greatest Naked Gun Lines" on YouTube, like responsible grownups?

It's very old, this urge to meet our fears face to face. We know of a plague in Athens in 430 B.C., and the scholarly consensus is that Sophocles' "Oedipus Rex," which starts with a Theban priest reporting a universal bane (inhabitants, animals, crops) to Oedipus, was first performed as early as the following year. It is as if the drama were a symptom: the lingering fallout of havoc. Ingmar Bergman, who staged many tragedies as a theatre director, was not one to flinch from the mysterious appeal of cataclysm. Hence his parable of medieval Sweden, "The Seventh Seal" (1957), in which a squire (Gunnar Björnstrand), returning from the Crusades in the service of a knight (Max von Sydow), hails a hooded man and gets no reply. The man is dead, with an eyeless head, dried like a fig and hollowed out by pestilence. Elsewhere, wandering flagellants lash one another for having incurred the wrath of the Almighty. The squire greets a cheerful artist, busy depicting the Dance of Death on the walls of a church, and asks him:

> "Why paint such daubings?"
> "To remind people they will die."
> "That won't make them happier."
> "Why always make them happy? Why not frighten them a bit?"
> "They'll just close their eyes then."
> "Believe me, they'll look."

These days, with hours to fill and a plethora of screens, we've done more than our share of looking: enough, perhaps, to drive us slightly mad. To trawl through the archives of plague-infested cinema is to play a grim new game. Works of fiction suddenly sound like news, and vice versa. Lines of dialogue that would once have zipped by, unremarked, now snag in your head, and the plainest of images acquire a tint of irony and menace. Steven Soderbergh, the director of "Contagion," gets credit for clairvoyance, with his loaded closeups of elevator buttons, glass tumblers, and doorknobs: everyday surfaces, friendly to congregating germs.

If you'd watched the film a year ago, and heard Kate Winslet, as a solemn scientist, assert that "the average person touches their face two or three thousand times a *day*," you'd have given a skeptical snort. Now you just nod, stick your hands in your pockets, and silently vow never to blow your nose again. Likewise, a C.D.C. bigwig, played by Laurence Fishburne, declares, "Our best defense has been social distancing. No handshaking, staying home when you're sick, washing your hands frequently." The White House should have played that clip on a loop, at the onset of COVID-19, and kept Donald Trump away from the cameras. In "Contagion," as in "The Matrix," the law is clear: when Fishburne speaks, obey.

The same goes for Richard Widmark, in "Panic in the Streets" (1950). He plays Clint Reed, a doctor with the U.S. Public Health Service, in New Orleans, who diagnoses pneumonic plague in the corpse of a foreigner who recently arrived on a boat. The guy had been shot, so who's to say that his assassins weren't infected? And what about the ordinary citizens with whom he came into contact: can they be traced and inoculated? The movie was made by Elia Kazan, whose next film, a year later, was "A Streetcar Named Desire," with "On the Waterfront" to come, in 1954; no director paid more knowledgeable attention to the working men and women of America, and what makes you chew your nails, during "Panic in the Streets," is the fate not of potential victims in the aggregate but of specific individuals, with life stories waiting to be cut short. That big sweaty guy, who sat at a card table with Patient Zero: *he* may have the bug. Or the cook in the Greek restaurant, wearied by her toils. Don't forget *her*.

Kazan's movie—shot on location, with shadows deep enough to harbor fugitives, or worse—feels thrillingly prescient and fraught, never more so than when Reed rounds on the mayor of the city and his associates, who are fretting about the effect of the virus on their immediate community. You can hear a snarl in Reed's impatient retort. "*Community*? What community? D'you think you're living in the Middle Ages?" he says, casually discarding a touchstone of American civic faith. He adds, "I could leave here today and I could be in Africa tomorrow." The officials are still thinking small, as if New Orleans were a walled town, whereas Reed is thinking ahead, all too aware that the plague has grander plans. In the end, his urgent precautions pay off, and the movie's title never comes to pass: there is no panic in the streets. Still, it was a near thing. It always is.

What happens, though, in taller and more fantastical tales, in which the scourge has already triumphed? Take a nervy little yarn like "Carriers," with Chris Pine as a resourceful jock named Brian. Made in 2006 but not released until 2009, after Pine had found fame in "Star Trek," the film begins with a voice, laying down some easy-to-follow laws:

> 1. Avoid the infected at all costs. Their breath is highly contagious.
> 2. Disinfect anything they've touched in the last 24 hours.
> 3. The sick are already dead. They can't be saved.

And then an afterthought: "You break the rules, you die. You follow them, you live. Maybe." That has the dark rumble of the genuine B movie, and we laugh at the overstating of the case, though our laughter, in the era of COVID-19, has an anxious edge. Many of the sick *can* be saved, in our hospitals, but the point about disinfection strikes us as common sense. ("We've got loads of Clorox," Brian says, as if rolling up at a party with kegs of beer.) There are bits of "Carriers"—basically a road trip, with four young Americans coasting through a virus-riddled land—that make you wince, as when the travellers pass a garbage truck labelled "Human Remains Removal and Disposal" or a man's body strung up at the roadside with a sign around his neck that reads "Chinks brought it." An old Hollywood tradition, this, going back to the heyday, or the heynight, of film noir: it's often the smaller and cheaper movies, rather than the prestige productions, that get to root around in paranoia, xenophobia, guilt, and blame.

The most alarming thing I've come across, in this trade-off between the real and the imagined, is a brief exchange from Robert Wise's "The Andromeda Strain" (1971). Chunks of some wacky alien substance—"No proteins, no enzymes, no nucleic acids. Impossible!"—have been exposed to earthly air, annihilating all persons in the vicinity and reducing their blood to a finely sifted powder. (Babies are unharmed: a blessed exception.) The experts' qualms are relayed to the very top:

> "By then, the disease could spread into a worldwide epidemic."
> "It's because of rash statements like that the President doesn't trust scientists."

That's a little *too* close to the bone, I reckon, but you have to congratulate Wise on his bold career swerve into sci-fi, six years after making "The Sound of Music," and on predicting how harshly politics and medicine can scrape against each other, whenever peril impends. And "The Andromeda Strain" is right to prophesy that, should life from elsewhere fall to Earth, it will, as likely as not, comprise a small patch of what appears to be blue-green mold with limited social skills. My main concern, frankly, is not that it could mow us down in droves but that, owing to an unfortunate housekeeping glitch, it might get squirted with bleach and removed with a lemon-scented wipe. Thus would end our only contact with another life-form, although President Trump, of course, would insist on seeing the bright side. "Me and the mold got on great," he'd say. "It had a terrific time. I also think, and I'm not just saying this, that I would make a tremendous mold."

Of all the auteurs who have made their point with plagues, the very first was Moses. True, he never slung a pair of headphones around his neck—de rigueur, these days, for any director who wishes to look the part. But his contract really *was* written in stone, presumably to the delight of his agent. And nobody, before or since, has enjoyed so solid a relationship with the studio boss. As for narrative suspense, what a knack! If you're persuading a potentate to let your people go, you can't just wheel on the grandeur. You've got to mix it up a little. Most folks, in Moses' place, would have gone straight from Plague No. 5, the blighting of livestock, to No. 7, the torrents of hail and fire. But not him. He saw the need for something in between, at No. 6. Something intimate and icky. Cue the boils.

And so a great bewilderment fell upon the land, in 1956, when Cecil B. DeMille's "The Ten Commandments"—his second shot at the theme, after an earlier attempt, in 1923—was released. Wise men beheld the film and said unto themselves, Hang on. There are only four plagues here! Whither the other six? Have we not been fleeced, like rams? Word has it that DeMille, rarely a man to be defeated, couldn't devise a way to conjure a shower of frogs, for instance, without inducing a ripple of sniggers among his viewers. He wanted 'em to be struck dumb with awe, and to stay dumb. Whether he would have scorned or envied Ridley Scott, who *did* manage to bring on the frogs, in a kind of pestilential hip-hop, for "Exodus: Gods and Kings" (2014), we shall never know.

Time has wrought many changes to "The Ten Commandments." As Moses, Charlton Heston (him *again*) still holds the screen in his clutches, extolling "the power of Gud." And you can't help admiring DeMille's pugnacious perseverance; he's like a Bible salesman who won't stop knocking until you open the door. Offered the choice between show and tell, he invariably plumps for both. When Moses' staff is dipped into the

Nile, the water turns to blood. "The water turns to blood!" somebody cries out, just in case. And yet, amid the famed enormity of the production, a few of the quieter scenes hit home, not least the spectacle of Pharaoh's wife slowly entering a room where her husband sits brooding. She bears their dead son—their only son—in her arms.

The problem that DeMille is confronting here, with unwonted finesse, is one with which every filmmaker has to contend when aiming to dramatize not merely affliction—which, heaven knows, is hard enough—but affliction en masse. The relevant passage from the Book of Exodus reads:

> And all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sitteth upon his throne, even unto the firstborn of the maidservant that is behind the mill; and all the firstborn of beasts. And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there was none like it, nor shall be like it any more.

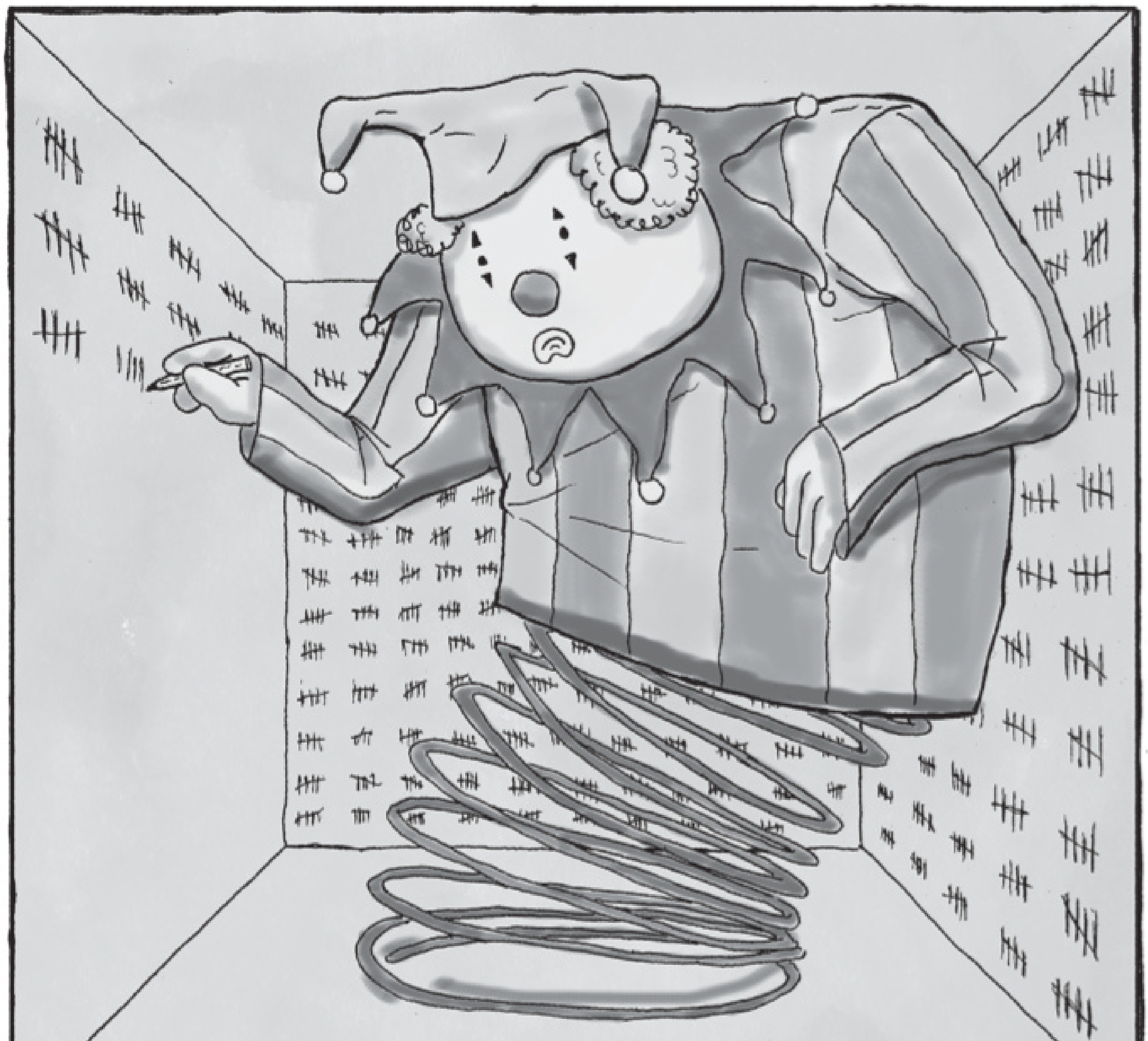
In the space of two verses, we pull back from one woman, behind a mill, to an entire country, reverse-zooming from a closeup to a panoramic wide shot. How to encompass all that? DeMille's response is to focus on the clause about Pharaoh's child, trusting that the intensity of the bereavement will radiate outward and suggest a broader grief.

A similar impulse spurred F. W. Murnau. He was the director of "Nosferatu" (1922) and "Sunrise" (1927), and DeMille's superior in every respect—apart from longevity, for Murnau died in a car crash, on the Pacific Coast Highway, at the age of forty-one. His most restless creation was "Faust" (1926), all smolder and flare, and the most celebrated image in the film is that of Mephisto, the size of a mountain and the shape of a bat, looming possessively over the neat German town into which he will, at his pleasure, insert the plague. When it arrives, it's not some invisible foe but a rat-gray mist that creeps through the winding passageways: an effect achieved by the use of a propeller and soot. Yet portent is balanced with pathos. Years before Orson Welles, Murnau recognized that depth of field could be bound up with depths of feeling; notice, near the camera, the feet of a victim, who is unceremoniously picked up and carted away, or the face of an ailing mother, whose distressed daughter, in the background, summons Faust to the sickbed and begs him for aid. No joy. If he is to wield miracles, he will need new powers.

"Faust," like "Nosferatu," was made in the long shadow of the Spanish flu, which, in little more than a year, starting in March, 1918, killed tens of millions of people. Its direct cultural imprint was remarkably thin, as if the First World War had exhausted our collective will to commemorate, and we must search for traces where we can: a gaunt self-portrait by Edvard Munch, say, who survived the pandemic, or Egon Schiele's painting of himself and his wife, Edith, both of whom died of the flu in the fall of 1918. There is also a child in the picture, held and protected between Edith's feet. She was pregnant at the time, so it's a child-to-be—and, alas, a child that never was.

Nothing so harrowing, it seems, was allowed to intrude upon the movies, though we do have "The Plague in Florence" (1919), written by Fritz Lang, in which the chief purveyor of death is not a hooded fellow with a scythe but a grinning fiddle player who prances past the deceased, as if the melodies had merely made them swoon. Then, there's the town crier, in "Nosferatu," who marches down an eerily vacant street to make his announcement. The townsfolk eagerly muster at their windows to catch the news he brings; when he tells them what else they may be catching, they slam the windows shut.

Only one major director has ventured into the zone of corporeal contagion and loitered there. In film after film, from "Shivers" (1975) onward, David Cronenberg has turned his tranquil and fascinated gaze on sights and sounds from which the rest of us might veer in disgust. In "Rabid" (1977), a leech-like proboscis pokes out from a woman's armpit. More startling still are the glimmers of beauty and wit; I refer you to the opening credits of "The Fly" (1986), when what seems to be a pulsing mob of microbes, viewed as if on a glass slide, gradually resolves itself into a roomful of *Homo sapiens*. Can you recall a more telling visual pun? Well before the advent of social media, Cronenberg understood what it means to go viral. "A virus is only doing its job. It's trying to live its life," he has said. "I think most



diseases would be very shocked to be considered diseases at all. It's a very negative connotation." Poor little Ebola! Spare a thought for COVID-19!

Cronenberg would be amused and gratified, no doubt, to learn that, while embarking on a private retrospective of his work, I succumbed to the coronavirus. Pretty soon, I couldn't decide whether I was watching the films or the films were watching me. Perhaps they smelled fresh meat. To see "Shivers" while having the shivers is quite a ride. Other side effects of the virus include splintered sleep, drumming headaches, and special corona dreams, which are like Hieronymus Bosch without the playfulness; would Cronenberg be interested, do you think, in buying the rights to my nights? "Shivers," with its talk of fatty cysts and abdominal growths, not to mention the charming scene in which a doctor discusses parasites while chomping on a pickle, finds the director already probing our itchy desire to experiment, and to hell with the outcome. Best of all is the movie's envoi, in which a steady flow of genial couples, all of them infected with a strain of hungry venereal mania, drive smoothly out of an underground garage and head for a night on the town.

Why does Cronenberg disturb our peace? Because he is the bringer of bad news. He lays bare the elements of which we are composed, thereby reminding us that we shall, like all animals, decompose and die. Nowadays, such disclosures are uncalled for, and the classic memento mori (the fulminating broadside from the pulpit, the skull in the hand) is deemed to be in poor taste—unlike a zombie, say, which, though fond of our flesh, has the decency not to reproach us. Never before, in short, has so little heed been paid to the fact of mortality. Previous generations would be staggered to realize that many of us, apart from doctors, nurses, traffic cops, military personnel, and the staff of funeral parlors, may never see a dead body, unboxed, and will feel all the happier for our lack of experience. To be sure, we are assailed by violent films, yet the violence is mainly a magic show, designed to stun the senses and keep us cruelly entertained, whereas to Cronenberg, as to Bergman and Murnau, the spectacle of our demise is more like a weather report. Beware the cold front, and the storm.

There are innumerable areas of the world, of course, where fatal diseases continue to hover on the threshold. And there is no country in which the impoverished and the underprivileged are not the first port of call for a roving malady. In the cozier nooks of the well-furnished and relentlessly medicated West, however, we have told ourselves—or fooled ourselves—that life, far from hanging by a thread, is sitting comfortably, pouring itself a drink, putting on some Michael Bublé, and going nowhere in a hurry. As for the very rich, I suspect that they regard COVID-19 as a personal insult and a slight on their omnipotence: How dare it trespass on their splendor? Can't it just be paid to go away?

Whether the coronavirus will jolt us from such blitheness, or whether it will be sorted out and set aside as a freakish interlude, it's far too early to say. As a rule, though, never underestimate our capacity *not* to learn from our mistakes. Movies are an excellent guide to human error, because they lean so yearningly toward hope—or, if you prefer, stray so comically into self-delusion. Observe the finale of "I Am Legend," which takes us to the gates of a fortified settlement, run by the uninfected (where did *they* spring from?), who provide welcoming smiles and a chance to build a new existence. It's that simple. Even "Contagion," the most plausible of fever films, comes over all excited at the climax, as one researcher discovers a vaccine with which to beat the plague. Admittedly, she's played by Jennifer Ehle, and I can think of no one better or calmer to save the world, but, nevertheless, set beside the vast international effort to combat COVID-19, this vision of the heroic loner owes less to scientific practice than to cinematic myth.

Indeed, it's what you *don't* come across, in the swath of plague movies, that seems most bizarre. There are no proper lockdowns, for one thing, or few that aren't swiftly interrupted; no sooner have the hideaways, in "28 Weeks Later," sat down to a relaxing candlelit meal than a zombie horde rampages in and starts treating them as entrées. The landscape of lockdown that we have come to know in 2020—the fidgets, the boredom, the halfhearted initiatives, the quality time that shades into a family furor—is anathema to cinema, although Bergman, again, is the exception. In "Shame" (1968), he presents us with a married couple, huddled tight against war rather than contagion, and musing on their enforced leisure. "I'm going to start learning Italian," the wife says. Her husband replies, "Each morning, after we've fed the chickens, we should play music." Good luck with that. The two of them wind up famished at sea, in a rowboat, with bodies floating by.

For those newly versed in the coronavirus, though, something else is amiss. The average plague film, to be blunt, is all cure and no care. Characters scramble for remedies, often with sensational success. The renaissance of the human race, according to "I Am Legend," will depend exclusively on a vial of precious blood. But the hard medical slog, such as we witness on the news, with doctors and nurses all but engulfed by the task of tending the sick—by and large, that doesn't make it into the movies. If you want both sides of the story, I would recommend not a moving picture but a still one. Tintoretto's "Saint Roch Cures the Plague Victims" was painted in 1549 for the Church of San Rocco, in Venice, where it remains today. The church has been closed of late, COVID-19 having marked Venice on its itinerary and made sure to swing by. Infections have always loved the place. Like tourists, they keep going back.

As ever, with Tintoretto, the light has something to tell us. Lurid and glaring at the forefront of the action, it recedes farther back into a flickering gloom. And the painting yawns wide, like a CinemaScope screen, as it must, in order to accommodate the host of naked and half-dressed figures who fill the canvas. Many of them display buboes—smarting red pustules that signal the plague—on their thighs. One bubo, a sneak preview of Cronenberg, swells inside an armpit. And there, at the painting's center, is the saint, not staring up to the heavens, in rapture, but patiently down at a man's infected leg. In the midst of life we are in death, as Tintoretto, like his fellow-Venetians, knew all too well; but he believed, also, that the opposite holds true. No drama of disease, however monstrous, is complete without the labor of love. ♦

BOOKS

THE SPIRIT OF ST. LOUIS

Is “racial capitalism” the key to American history?

BY NICHOLAS LEMANN

Before the Civil War, Southern slaveholders used to claim that their labor system was more humane than “wage slavery” in the factories of the industrializing North. They didn’t win that argument, but the idea took root that the South, during and after slavery, did not have a true capitalist economy. In 1930, twelve Southern writers (all white men) published a collection of essays, titled “I’ll Take My Stand,” that opened with a declaration that they “all tend to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way; and all as much as agree that the best terms in which to represent the distinction are contained in the phrase, Agrarian *versus* Industrial.” To believe that the South was economically different didn’t entail being a defender of slavery or segregation; it didn’t even have to mean you were a political conservative. When I was growing up in New Orleans, among the descendants of antebellum sugar and cotton planters, efficiency and industriousness were not highly valued, and all the general social indicia—income, health, education—were much lower than they were in the North. This condition seemed connected to the exploitation and political disempowerment that went along with a racial caste system. It was worse than capitalism, not part of capitalism.

For revisionists, slavery’s end simply ushered in a new phase of exploitation.

But for many years now historians have disputed the old Southern agrarian notions about how the South related to capitalism. This form of revisionism, which has blossomed in the academy and beyond during the past decade or so, takes its inspiration from “Capitalism and Slavery,” published in 1944 by Eric Williams, a young historian who later became the first Prime Minister of an independent Trinidad and Tobago. The book, which argued for the centrality of slavery to the rise of capitalism, was largely ignored for half a century; now its thesis is a starting point for a new generation of scholarship. Large-scale Southern slaveholders are today understood as experts in such business practices as harsh, ever-increasing production quotas for workers and the creation of sophisticated credit instruments. Rather than representing an alternative system to industrial capitalism, American plantations enabled its development, providing the textile mills of Manchester and Birmingham with cotton to be spun into cloth by the new British working class. As Walter Johnson, one of our leading historians of slavery, wrote in 2018, “There was no such thing as capitalism without slavery: the history of Manchester never happened without the history of Mississippi.”

The new history of slavery seeks to obliterate the economic and moral distinction between slavery and capitalism, and between the South and the North, by showing them to have been all part of a single system. Inevitably, this view has generated intense arguments, not only about how integral the slave plantation was to the national and global economies but also about whether we should regard the end of slavery as an important breakpoint in American history or merely a rearranging of an oppressive system into an altered but still essentially oppressive form. Critics of the new history of slavery chastise it for downplaying developments like Britain’s abolition of slavery in its colonies and the American Civil War, and for overstating slavery’s importance to the growth of the early American economy, even if the plantation was a particularly ruthless business enterprise.

The arguments about slavery imply

ILLUSTRATION BY KEITH NEGLEY

larger arguments about America. At least among respectable academic historians, the days of triumphant historical accounts of the greatness of the United States are long past. But for some the national enterprise can still be seen as a slow and often interrupted progression toward a more just and democratic society; for others, it amounts to a set of variations on racial hierarchy and economic exploitation. Once slavery is positioned as the foundational institution of American capitalism, the country's subsequent history can be depicted as an extension of this basic dynamic. This is what Walter Johnson does in his new book, "The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States" (Basic). The study demonstrates both the power of the model and its limitations.

Johnson, who grew up in Missouri, tells us that he was moved to write the book by the events in Ferguson in the summer of 2014—the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teen-ager, by a police officer named Darren Wilson, and the period of local unrest and national attention that followed. In Johnson's account, Ferguson emerges as the distillation of a vexed history that goes back to the city's beginnings. Johnson's earlier work presented slavery as the furthest thing from a "peculiar institution" set apart from the American mainstream; here, he makes a similar case for the centrality of St. Louis. "St. Louis has been the crucible of American history," he writes. "Much of American history has unfolded from the juncture of empire and anti-Blackness in the city of St. Louis."

Johnson's guiding concept is "racial capitalism": racism as a technique for exploiting black people and for fomenting the hostility of working-class whites toward blacks, so as to enable white capitalists to extract value from everyone else. For his purposes, St. Louis is a case study in the pervasiveness and the longevity of racism outside the formal boundaries of slavery. As he wrote in an earlier essay, "The history of racial capitalism, it must be emphasized, is a history of wages as well as whips, of factories as well as plantations, of whiteness as well as blackness, of 'freedom' as well as slavery."

A small French outpost situated just below the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, St. Louis became part of the United States in 1803, owing to the Louisiana Purchase. Thomas Jefferson soon put in motion the Lewis and Clark expedition, which set off from St. Louis, in 1804. In Johnson's account, St. Louis in its early decades becomes the staging area for the brutal taking of the American West. For blinkered whites like William Clark, the complicated realities of the West were "subordinated to a racially fundamentalist understanding of the world (red, white, and black) and the politics of white settler imperialism and ethnic cleansing." The Missouri Compromise, in 1820, admitted Missouri to the Union as a slave state, and, Johnson points out, Missouri's new constitution restricted the rights of black people, preventing free blacks from settling in the state.

A parade of men (most of them, in Johnson's telling, closely connected to St. Louis) who were long presented to schoolchildren as the heroes of American history are revealed to be anything but. The iniquities of Jefferson and of Lewis and Clark are a mere prologue to those of Andrew Jackson, "the nation's most prominent Indian hater"; John C. Frémont, the explorer and the first Presidential candidate of the Republican Party, who "was an imperialist and, by any modern standard, a war criminal"; and Ulysses S. Grant, whose essential military technique was "murderous fury." Abraham Lincoln comes off no better. He began his career as a "settler militiaman," and, for the rest of his life, "remained committed to ethnic cleansing." Lincoln developed a winning political platform for the Republicans in which slavery was opposed mainly because it competed with the economic interests of white farmers and laborers; Lincoln's first priority was to deliver a whites-only frontier to the "white supremacist, imperialist, and removalist" Republican base. Horace Greeley's Liberal Republican movement, following the Civil War, was based on a "white nationalist" ideology whose "predictable result" was genocide.

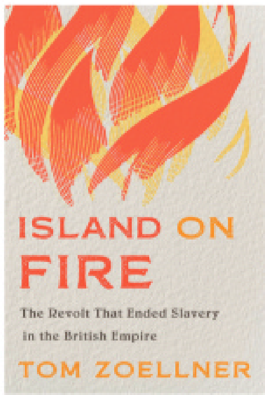
At the World's Fair of 1904, hosted by St. Louis, Johnson finds a literal exhibit of this enduring legacy: an elaborate celebration of the centennial of the Louisiana Purchase that was "designed to domesticate the restive immigrant workers of St. Louis by turning them into white people," and to insure white workers' "proper alignment with the course of freedom-through-capitalism and imperial progress." Such racial capitalism led to the city's most notorious incident of racial violence before Ferguson, the East St. Louis massacre of 1917, which left dozens of black people dead and thousands more displaced, and which was sparked by the hiring of black replacement workers during an aluminum-ore processors' strike. "The white workers of East St. Louis kept on somehow believing that the city belonged to them rather than their corporate overlords," Johnson writes. "They believed it with such force and passion, such a sense of beleaguered entitlement, that when the time came, they would prove more than willing to kill for it." And this massacre, Johnson says, "forecast" a series of violent post-First World War incidents in other American cities.

Indeed, as Johnson moves through the twentieth century, he consistently treats what are often taken to be national trends as toxic gifts from St. Louis. In the early years of the century, St. Louis voters passed one of the country's first public referendums to institute residential segregation. Later, the city made copious use of restrictive covenants that barred black home buyers from white neighborhoods; the 1948 Supreme Court opinion that declared restrictive covenants legally unenforceable—a decision that was widely ignored—originated in St. Louis. Harland Bartholomew, the St. Louis version of mid-century urban master planners like Robert Moses, used his "malign genius" to become "the segregation and suburbanization czar of the United States." The bulldozing of black neighborhoods that looked to whites like slums (such as the one where the Gateway Arch now stands) and their partial replacement by high-rise public-housing projects, aggressive policing, mass incarceration, and the use of business-friendly, community-unfriendly tax abatements to revitalize older cities—all this, in Johnson's telling, was pioneered in St Louis.

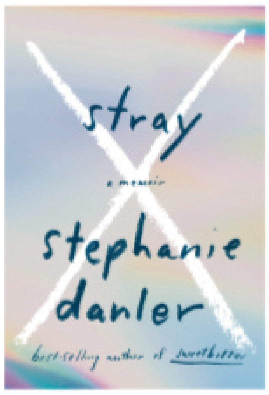
Racial capitalists conquered the West; racial capitalists waged the Civil War; racial capitalists industrialized St. Louis, and then deindustrialized it, at every step exploiting black people just as brutally as slaveholders did. It's a big, all-explanatory theory that is serviced by the tone of Johnson's account, which is forcefully didactic at every moment. "The Broken Heart of America" is a history populated by good guys and bad guys—many more of the latter. Johnson doesn't hesitate to use terms that didn't exist at the time to describe the motivations of historical actors: "genocide," "settler colonialism," "ethnic cleansing"—terms given a honed edge by being relieved of historical specificity. Even one of the few entities he approves of, an "urban guerrilla" organization called ACTION, which staged public demonstrations to protest, for example, the lack of black construction workers hired to build the Gateway Arch, in the mid-nineteen-sixties, is reprimanded for being "racist, sexist, and heteronormative" in its embrace of the view "that a male breadwinner was the keystone figure of healthy Black family life."

Johnson's propensity for pasting condemnatory labels on his characters displays a concern that, without his firm guidance, readers may not draw the proper conclusions from the material he is presenting. He is disinclined to describe any situation as ambiguous. In the case of Michael Brown, Johnson doesn't hesitate to call it a murder. Darren Wilson, he suggests, stopped Brown for jaywalking, and then, "after a short scuffle in the street, Brown ran away. When Wilson shot him, several witnesses later asserted, Brown had his hands raised in the air." Johnson is polite about the Obama Justice Department's 2015 report on the Ferguson police department's systemic racial bias, but only in the endnotes does he mention the Justice Department's second, simultaneously issued report, on the incident itself, which concluded that the facts of the case didn't warrant federal prosecution. Giving particular weight to witnesses whose testimony was consistent with the forensic evidence, investigators concluded that

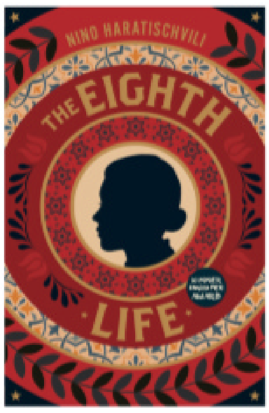
BRIEFLY NOTED



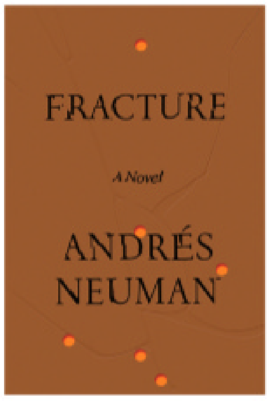
Island on Fire, *by Tom Zoellner (Harvard).* In May, 1832, Samuel Sharpe, the leader of Jamaica's greatest slave rebellion, was executed. Sharpe had been an "elite" slave: a literate Baptist deacon who travelled around the country delivering powerful sermons to other slaves. The previous December, Sharpe and his followers had covertly organized a nonviolent labor strike. Although the rebels lost the ensuing military struggle, a five-week-long ordeal that laid waste to dozens of plantations across the colony, the impact of their protest was substantial. Zoellner makes deft use of primary sources, and illustrates how the atmosphere of energetic political reform and events like Sharpe's rebellion converged to end slavery in the "agricultural prison camp" of Jamaica, and in the British Empire at large.



Stray, *by Stephanie Danler (Knopf).* After nearly a decade in New York, the author of this memoir returns to the canyons of Los Angeles, where she was born, to await the publication of her début novel, "Sweetbitter." In California, she carries on a damaging affair with a married man, and her book excavates the dynamics that have shaped her patterns of heedless behavior, examining how her father's drug addiction and her mother's alcoholism inform her own substance abuse and her problems with fidelity. The family portrait that emerges is unsparing, but it is tempered with the tenderness of Danler's language, and with her willingness to reserve her harshest rebukes for herself.



The Eighth Life, *by Nino Haratischvili, translated from the German by Charlotte Collins and Ruth Martin (Scribe).* Georgia, a picturesque nation squeezed between the Caucasus Mountains and the Black Sea, was once considered a wine-soaked playground for the Soviet upper crust. This multigenerational epic, framed as a gift from the embittered narrator, Niza, to her wayward niece, provides a more nuanced view. It begins with Niza's bourgeois great-grandmother, whose dream of becoming a ballerina is derailed by Lenin's revolution. Her descendants are likewise transformed by upheavals of the twentieth century: Stalinist purges, the Second World War, the Prague Spring, Georgia's independence, and the subsequent civil war. Through these events, the novel offers not only a critique of Soviet and Russian imperial ambitions but a necessary reappraisal of Georgian history.



Fracture, *by Andrés Neuman, translated from the Spanish by Nick Caistor and Lorenza Garcia (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).* This novel begins on the afternoon, in 2011, when the Tōhoku earthquake hit Japan. A retiree, anxiously watching TV in his apartment in Tokyo, sees tsunamis destroy coastal villages and hears talk of a nuclear meltdown. A native of Nagasaki, he lost his family in the atomic bombings of 1945; he has not returned in the six decades since, while a job at a Japanese electronics company sent him around the world. Filled with insights into cross-cultural intimacies, the book is charged with the man's distaste for what history does to tragedies: turning injuries of flesh and blood into crude symbols.

Wilson heard of a robbery at a local market, that Brown reached into Wilson's car and tussled with him, and that Brown was approaching Wilson when he was fatally shot. (Many of these points are intensely in dispute.) Without addressing the specifics, Johnson writes that the report "is, at best, a legalistic restatement of the extraordinary latitude provided police officers who shoot unarmed people in the United States and, at worst, a complete misunderstanding of the full circumstances surrounding the shooting."

In the craft of history, tendentiousness is an ever-present temptation; Johnson is as insistently moralizing in his way as previous generations of romantic, heroic historians of the West were in theirs. A story centered on a transhistorical force of oppression—spotlighting St. Louis as the capital of racial capitalism—offers an all-encompassing explanation but doesn't leave much room for racism untethered from capitalism or capitalism untethered from racism. Other scholars have found different ways of explaining the same parlous present-day conditions in distressed black neighborhoods. James Forman, Jr., in "Locking Up Our Own" (2017), showed how a series of late-twentieth-century policing and sentencing techniques, widely endorsed by tough-on-crime public officials, black and white, wound up putting many more black people in prison and making things worse in black communities. In "The Origins of the Urban Crisis" (1996), a work centered on postwar Detroit, the historian Thomas Sugrue insisted on an approach to urban history that took into account a range of factors, including not obviously racial ones like deindustrialization; in its introduction, he wrote, "The coincidence and mutual reinforcement of race, economics, and politics in a particular historical moment, the period from the 1940s to the 1960s, set the stage for the fiscal, social, and economic crises that confront urban America." The implication of these books is that significant policy changes would help black communities. They have that in common with many previous books about urban black America in the twentieth century, including the greatest of them all, St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's "Black Metropolis," from 1945. Johnson, impatient with such particularity, always goes both smaller, in the sense of depicting St. Louis as a fulcrum of history, and bigger, in the sense of making racial capitalism an eternal, all-powerful force, floating free of any specific time or place.

The idea that racism can be connected to capitalism has been around for a long time; the question is how the connection works, and whether the two are inextricable. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his great speech on the steps of the Alabama statehouse at the conclusion of the Selma-to-Montgomery march, in 1965, said, "The segregation of the races was really a political stratagem employed by the emerging Bourbon interests in the South to keep the southern masses divided and southern labor the cheapest in the land." King was at that moment pushing for the passage of the Voting Rights Act and other civil-rights legislation, so he had a reason to locate the nexus of race and capitalism specifically in the Southern Jim Crow system. Within a year, he was leading demonstrations against slumlords in hypersegregated Chicago, and advocating new forms of national legislation, like the Fair Housing Act. In 2018, more than ninety per cent of African-American voters in Missouri cast their ballots against Josh Hawley, the victorious Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate; Hawley now presents himself as a critic of global capitalism without ever mentioning race. It's possible to be anti-capitalist without being anti-racist, and anti-racist without being anti-capitalist. Johnson might say that both positions are deluded, but they have appeared regularly in our country's history.

Through it all, black neighborhoods, especially poor black neighborhoods, still bear the weight of a malign history. Reading "The Broken Heart of America" inevitably prompts the question of how what's broken might be repaired. Does a politically charged history come with a politics for the here and now?

Historically, Johnson doesn't find many people to admire. Among whites, the main exceptions are a few Communists and radically inclined labor organizers. He takes a dim view, too, of mainstream black organizations like the N.A.A.C.P. and the Urban League. Liberal politicians hardly attract his notice, except when, as in the case of Lincoln, their reputations require revising downward. But after laying out a relentlessly bleak history he ends, jarringly, on a hopeful note. During the unrest following Michael Brown's death, he tells us, "the disinherited of St. Louis rose again to take control of their history." Since then, a number of activists—Johnson provides thumbnail sketches of them—have launched efforts in poor black neighborhoods meant to reverse, or at least resist, the pernicious workings of racial capitalism. Today, Johnson writes, "I have never been to a more amazing, hopeful place in my life." Underlying his stated optimism is an implicit conviction that it wouldn't do much good to look for help from the larger society; the victims of oppression must find a way forward by themselves.

As a child in the Jim Crow South during the civil-rights era, growing up in a conservative white milieu, I often overheard bitter adult conversations about the hypocrisy of white liberals in the North. Were they really any better than Southern segregationists, to go by their lived behavior? Walter Johnson, coming from the left, offers a good deal of empirical support for opinions like that. His account discourages us from drawing much hope from past events like the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, the major civil-rights victories of the sixties, or the election of Barack Obama as President; the regime of racial capitalism, in his vision, always manages to reconstitute itself. Broader reforms that aimed, at least, to smooth the roughest edges of capitalism—like the regulation of business excesses or the creation of Social Security and Medicaid—are, we gather, no match for white supremacy.

Democratic politics, especially in a country with a racial history like ours, is necessarily messy, impure, and capable of producing no more than partial victories, and, even then, only when pushed hard by political movements. But deflating and deriding the progress it has made in the past and the promise it might hold for the future invites the hazards of defeatism. It distracts from the kinds of economic, educational, and criminal-justice reforms that mainstream progressives hope to enact. These are the tools we have at hand. It would be a shame not to use them. ♦

BOOKS

SLIPPERY TRUTH

When it comes to the eel, there is much to be learned from how little we know.

BY BROOKE JARVIS

In the spring of 1876, a young man of nineteen arrived in the seaside city of Trieste and set about a curious task. Every morning, as the fishermen brought in their catch, he went to meet them at the port, where he bought eels by the dozens and then the hundreds. He carried them home, to a dissection table in a corner of his room, and—from eight until noon, when he broke for lunch, and then again from one until six, when he quit for the day and went to ogle the women of Trieste on the street—he diligently slashed away, in search of gonads.

"My hands are stained by the white and red blood of the sea creatures," he wrote to a friend. "All I see when I close my eyes is the shimmering dead tissue, which haunts my dreams, and all I can think about are the big questions, the ones that go hand in hand with testicles and ovaries—the universal, pivotal questions."

The young man, whose name was Sigmund Freud, eventually followed his evolving questions in other directions. But in Trieste, elbow-deep in slime, he hoped to be the first person to find what men of science had been seeking for thousands of years: the testicles of an eel. To see them would be to begin to solve a profound mystery, one that had stumped Aristotle and countless successors throughout the history of natural science: Where do eels come from?

The nineteenth century had brought Darwin and Mendel, Pasteur and Mendeleev, and a growing sense that scientists (a word coined only in the eighteen-thirties), with their studies and their systems and their microscopes, were at last equal to solving the great quandaries of the natural world. Questions that had befuddled mankind for centuries—where life comes from, what it is made of, how it changes, why it ends—were now seen as knowable, quantifiable, explicable. Just two years before Freud arrived in Trieste, the German biologist Max Schultze, lying on his deathbed, observed, perhaps wistfully, that he was leaving a world where "all the important questions . . . had now been settled." All of them, that is, "except the eel question."

The mysterious creature has attracted avid detectives since ancient times.

What could be more ordinary than an eel? Not so long ago, European eels, *Anguilla anguilla*, were widely eaten. In Sweden, they might be smoked, braised in beer, or fried in butter; in Italy, boiled in tomato sauce; in England, jellied in stock, or fried with eggs into an elver cake. They were a simple and abundant food enjoyed by members of the poorer classes, like the Cockney woman described in "King Lear" who accidentally puts them in a pie still alive.

People caught eels in brooks, rivers, lakes, the sea. They also caught them, inexplicably, in ponds that dried out and refilled each year, and that had no access to other bodies of water. They couldn't help but notice that the creatures seemed to have no ovaries, no testicles, no eggs, no milt. That they were never observed to mate. That they sometimes seemed to issue from the earth itself. Eels were unaccountable, and so, writes the Swedish journalist Patrik Svensson in "The Book of Eels" (Ecco), an unusual and beguiling guide to an unusual and beguiling animal, it fell to us to try our best to account for them.

The ancient Egyptians believed that eels were produced by the sun warming the Nile; Aristotle decided that eels emerged spontaneously from mud and rainwater. Pliny the Elder thought

ILLUSTRATION BY JASON HOLLEY

that new eels developed when old eels rubbed away parts of their bodies on rocks. As late as the eighteen-sixties, a Scottish author espoused an old belief that they began their lives as beetles. "Some believed eels were born of sea-foam," Svensson writes, "or created when the rays of the sun fell on a certain kind of dew that covered lakeshores and riverbanks in the spring. In the English countryside, where eel fishing was popular, most people adhered to the theory that eels were born when hairs from horses' tails fell into the water."

The truth emerged only slowly, and was, in its own slippery way, stranger than the fiction. Careful observers discovered that what had long been taken for several different kinds of animals were in fact just one. The eel was a creature of metamorphosis, transforming itself over the course of its life into four distinct beings: a tiny gossamer larva with huge eyes, floating toward Europe in the open sea; a shimmering glass eel, known as an elver, a few inches in length with visible insides, making its way along coasts and up rivers; a yellow-brown eel, the kind you might catch in ponds, which can move across dry land, hibernate in mud until you've forgotten it was ever there, and live quietly for half a century in a single place; and, finally, the silver eel, a long, powerful muscle that ripples its way back to sea. When this last metamorphosis happens, the eel's stomach dissolves—it will travel thousands of miles on its fat reserves alone—and its reproductive organs develop for the first time. In the eels of Europe, no one could find those organs because they did not yet exist.

But, even as these answers were arrived at, "the eel question," as it was widely known, proved to be as changeable as the eel. It seemed to be forever unsolvable, for behind any eel answer there was always another eel question, shrouded by more layers of mystery.

"We know, then, that the old eels vanish from our ken into the sea, and that the sea sends us in return innumerable hosts of elvers," a Danish searcher, Johannes Schmidt, wrote. "But whither have they wandered, these old eels, and whence have the elvers come?" Schmidt became consumed by his questions; in 1904, he left his family in Copenhagen and set out to scour the seas for the very smallest of eels. For seven years, he trawled the coasts of Europe, but found only larger larvae. For another three years, he enlisted shipping companies to net larvae as they plied the North Atlantic, and turned his own schooner west and south. Net by net, he mapped the ocean according to which parts of it contained eel larvae, and how large those larvae were, until the tiniest ones led him to their point of origin. It was a slow process, made slower by a shipwreck and a world war. Finally, nineteen years after he first set out, Schmidt announced his findings. "How long the journey lasts we cannot say," he wrote, summoning the grandeur warranted by the occasion. "But we know now the destination sought: a certain area situated in the western Atlantic, N.E. and N. of the West Indies. Here lie the breeding grounds of the eel."

Schmidt had traced the *Anguilla anguilla* to the Sargasso Sea—a sea within a sea, a garden of seaweed bounded not by land but by great currents of water. (The American eel breeds there as well, and it is still something of a mystery how the larvae, all mixed together but genetically distinct, know which continent is their future home. The Japanese eel has its own breeding grounds, in the Pacific, and another famous freshwater eel, the electric one of South America, is not actually an eel at all; it's a knifefish.) Schmidt's discovery was an answer, and, in the past century, no one has successfully challenged it; that European eels come from the Sargasso Sea remains the official word of science. But, as with that sea and the animal born there, the boundaries of this knowledge are fluid and strange. Many expeditions have followed Schmidt to the breeding grounds in the decades since, each with better technology than the last. They, too, have found plenty of larvae, but, when one expedition collected and examined seven thousand fish eggs, not one of them turned out to be from an eel. Scientists have put G.P.S. trackers on silver eels beginning their migration; they've used hormones to bring females into heat, transported them to the breeding grounds, and attached them to buoys to use their pheromones as bait. They have dropped microphones into the water and opened the stomachs of predators. And yet no one has ever seen *Anguilla anguilla* mating anywhere, or so much as set eyes on a mature eel, living or dead, in the Sargasso Sea.

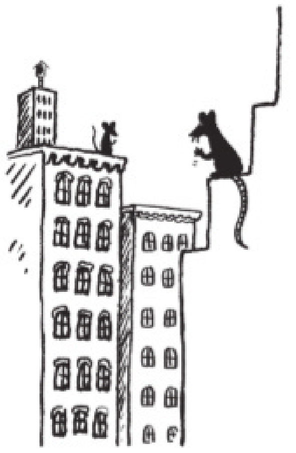
SUZY BECKER

"But, Mommy, we just played find your glasses this morning."

When Svensson was a child, in Sweden, he spent many evenings with his father, a road paver, on the banks of a stream that ran past his father's childhood home. Together, as dusk fell, they would rig and bait their lines and throw them into the stream, then drive home to the swooping of bats. At sunrise, they checked to see which hooks had been taken by yellow-brown eels, which they collected in buckets and ate fried or boiled. (His father relished the taste, but Svensson found it nauseating; it was the fishing, and the time with his father, that he loved.) He describes his father as a thoughtful man, "fascinated by all the strange and wonderful forms life took," but most of all by the peculiarity of eels: " 'They're odd, eels,' Dad would say. And he always seemed mildly delighted when he said it. As though he needed the mystery. As though it filled some kind of emptiness in him."

Once, the pair tried an old Swedish fishing method that involved stringing lots of worms on a thread and then rolling them "into a quivering, stinking ball of slime and secretions and writhing bodies." To catch the necessary worms, Svensson's father attached electric cables to the prongs of a pitchfork sunk into a freshly watered lawn, creating a surge of electricity that brought a wave of panicked worms wriggling to the surface. With the worm ball, they caught eel after eel, more than they'd ever caught before, "like pulling carrots out of a vegetable patch." But they didn't do it again. There was no struggle in it, no mystery or chance or solemnity. "It didn't tally with what we wanted the eel to be," Svensson muses. "Maybe we had gotten too close to it."

Svensson's book, like its subject, is a strange beast: a creature of metamorphosis, a shape-shifter that moves among realms. It is a book of natural history, and a memoir about a son and his father. It is also an exploration of literature and religion and custom, and what it means to live in a world full of questions we can't always answer. Svensson writes on page 1 that the eel "eludes the usual measures of the world," and as the book progresses he begins to see other things as similarly elusive. He has seen eels that appear to be dead but are not, and eels that really are dead—chopped up and frying in butter, even—but still move as though they were alive. "To the eel, death seemed relative," he writes. He has learned that the timing of an eel's final transformation, the one that brings it to both its own death and the birth of the next generation, seems to be unrelated to time itself: eels might feel the pull to return to the sea after eight years inland, or after nearly sixty, or never, remaining behind in a sort of suspended animation. The eels that travel together across the ocean might be at the same stage of life, yet decades apart in age. Svensson is captivated by the implications of this. "You have to ask yourself: How does a creature like that perceive time?" he wonders.



Svensson's grandmother was a believer in both God and gnomes. His father was not a believer, and neither is Svensson; their skepticism faltered "only where the eel was concerned." When his grandmother was dying, she told Svensson, "I will always be with you," and he immediately trusted her: "I didn't need to believe in God to believe that." Eventually, Svensson's father became sick with cancer, likely a result of his years paving roads, breathing in the steam of asphalt. In the summers before the diagnosis, Svensson had often visited him. "We drank coffee, and talked about eels we'd caught and eels we'd lost and not much else," he writes. As his father faded, Svensson lingered over the mysteries of time and existence, the watery border between death and life. He read Rachel Carson, who kept a tank of eels in her office and made an eel named Anguilla a protagonist of her first book, "Under the Sea-Wind." Anguilla lived in the pleasantly warm mud of a pond, "beyond all reminders of the sea" that another of her selves once knew. Still, one day, she felt the urge to depart her current life, her current self, to transform and make her way through "frigid waters, deliberate and inexorable as time itself," to a place where no one could follow. "No one can trace the path of the eels," Carson wrote.

A decade later, and a decade before Carson, too, died of cancer, she published another book about the sea. She describes it as a place where man "feels the loneliness of his earth in space. And then, as never on land, he knows the truth that his world is a water world, a planet dominated by a covering mantle of ocean, in which the continents are but transient intrusions of land above the surface of the all-encompassing sea."

The International Union for Conservation of Nature, a body charged with assessing the status of the natural world, has, unsurprisingly, had some trouble with eels. Ideally, to determine how the species is doing, the I.U.C.N. would like to know the number of "mature eels at their spawning grounds"—a number that is as knowable as the number of angels who can dance on the head of a pin.

Because ours is a world of making do, the I.U.C.N. instead counts the small glass eels that arrive in Europe each spring. For every hundred eels that showed up on the coasts in the nineteen-seventies, it's believed that now only five come to wriggle their way inland. The formerly ordinary, everyday eel is classified as critically endangered, the last official designation on the road toward nonexistence. (Well, there is also "extinct in the wild," but without their wild breeding grounds eels are nothing. No one has ever managed to breed them in captivity.) Svensson writes, "This is the latest and most urgent eel question: Why is it disappearing?"

There are many possible reasons, from disease to dams and locks, from fishing pressure to the warming climate, which is causing the ocean currents by which eels make their migrations to shift and change. But there may be other answers, and scientists are racing to find them—a quest that Svensson obviously supports but nonetheless considers not a little tragic. "Those of us who want to protect the eel in order to preserve something genuinely mysterious and enigmatic in a world of enlightenment will, in some ways, lose no matter how things turn out," he writes. "Anyone who feels an eel should be allowed to remain an eel can no longer afford the luxury of also letting it remain a mystery."

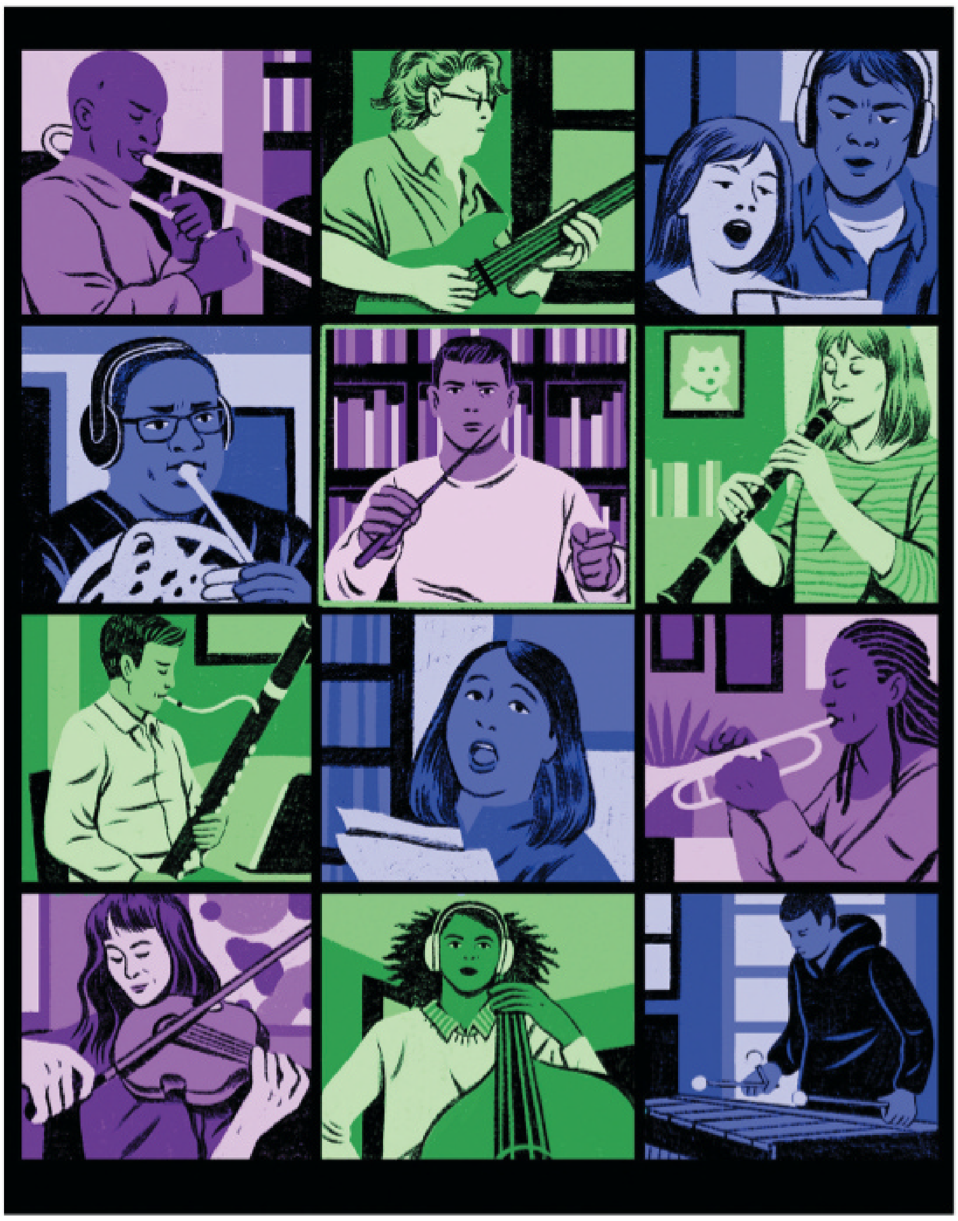
In our age of extinctions, every loss is like this: the disappearance not just of a creature from its ecosystem but of all that we might learn about it, all that we invest in it, all its layers of meaning, from our human future. To lose the eel is one grief; to lose the eel question, another. ♦

MUSICAL EVENTS

INTERMISSION

Live-streaming music at the Met, Bang on a Can, and elsewhere.

BY ALEX ROSS



The Met's music director, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, conducted into the void.

ILLUSTRATION BY CLAIRE MERCHLINSKY

Classical musicians, like their counterparts in the rest of the performing arts, have been trying to find a second life online during the pandemic shutdown. Pianists have streamed recitals from their homes; orchestras have used the Zoom app to create virtual ensembles; small groups have assembled in empty halls. Any discussion of this activity, encouraging as it is, must take into account that it unfolds against a backdrop of misery. The livelihood of thousands of musicians has been shattered overnight. People have been lost; grief runs deep. There should be no talk—I have seen some—of classical music "thriving" on the Internet. No one is thriving. No one is making money. No one is free from fear.

With that in mind, I've been glued to my computer in recent weeks, consuming live-streamed events around the world. As a critic, I am desperate to maintain contact with what musicians are doing, thinking, and feeling. The sound is often tinny, the stage patter awkward, the home décor distracting. One could instead sample archived professional-quality videos that opera houses, orchestras, and other organizations have placed online. For me, though, the live or freshly recorded happenings matter more. They document, with the oblique power that the arts possess, an extraordinary human phase in history. Their mere existence is bracing, and at times they achieve startling power.

One such moment arrived about forty minutes into the Metropolitan Opera's "At-Home Gala," a four-hour all-star program that took place on April 25th. After an affecting appearance by Renée Fleming, the screen filled with images of Met Orchestra players at home, holding their instruments. In the rectangle at the center was Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the Met's music director, conducting into the void. He led a prerecorded performance of the Intermezzo from "Cavalleria Rusticana"—some of the saddest, most wistful music ever written in a major key. Later, the orchestra was joined by members of the Met chorus for "Va, pensiero," the great anthem from "Nabucco" in which exiled Israelites salute "my homeland, so lovely and so lost."

Those two performances had a dizzying effect, not only because they sounded splendid—"Va, pensiero," especially, exuded the warmth of a collective act—but because they were done in a spirit of generosity that the Met may not have earned. At the end of March, the entire staff of performing musicians was furloughed: since then, they have been receiving health benefits but no salary. The Met faces existential financial challenges, to be sure, yet so do most other cultural organizations, and few have taken such drastic measures. According to the singer Zach Finkelstein, who has been reporting on the crisis at his blog, Middleclass Artist, a number of singers felt blindsided by the curt announcement of force-majeure cancellations.

The gala included thirty-three live vocal performances, from locales across Europe and America. The opportunity to gaze inside singers' homes stirred wry commentary on social media. René Pape's James Bond-ish pad provoked nervous titters; Elza van den Heever's towering bookshelves elicited admiration. A few singers won extra points for accompanying themselves at the piano. Günther Groissböck, after draining a stein of beer, sang and played "Wie schön ist doch die Musik," from "Die Schweigsame Frau"; Erin Morley displayed dazzling musicianship in "Chacun le sait," from "La Fille du Régiment." Cohabiting singers had the chance to perform duets. Ailyn Pérez and Soloman Howard's rendition of "A brani, a brani, o perfido," from "Luisa Miller," grew sufficiently sultry that a parental advisory seemed in order.

For the most part, the performances were more sweet than gripping, but a few would have been impressive under any circumstances. Lisette Oropesa gave an immaculate, glittering rendition of “En vain j’espère,” from “Robert le Diable”; Jamie Barton was grand and glowering in “O don fatale,” from “Don Carlo.” Afterward, Barton exclaimed, “Ooh, it’s fun to get to sing again!” She had, in fact, already returned to the stage, virtually, in “Coronadämmerung,” a staggering Wagner video masterfully edited by the bass-baritone Ryan McKinny. Barton and McKinny, accompanied on piano by Kathleen Kelly, sang and acted out an updated version of the Fricka-Wotan scene from “Das Rheingold,” incorporating FaceTime, impatient texts from Fasolt and Fafner, and a Zillow listing for Valhalla. It was at once absurd and compelling, like the best modern Wagner productions.

On May 3rd, the Bang on a Can composers’ collective, which has been holding annual new-music marathons since 1987, offered a six-hour online substitute. As with the Met gala, audio quality varied from the acceptable to the atrocious, and there were a few outright snafus: we saw Meredith Monk for several minutes before we heard her, live from her Tribeca apartment. The habitats of American composers and new-music specialists are generally less palatial than those of opera stars. The undoubted highlight was a glimpse of a legendary three-toed box turtle, named Neutron, which has been living with Monk since the late nineteen-seventies.

Every Bang on a Can marathon has its peaks and lulls, and this one was no exception. There were pieces long on ambience and short on ideas; there were sketches in need of an editor. I sat up in my desk chair for Anna Clyne’s “Rapture,” a jaggedly minimalistic work for clarinet and electronics; for Adam Cuthbért’s “Synthetic Flora,” an eerie dreamscape for trumpet and electronics; and for an angular meditation by the composer-guitarist Mary Halvorson. The master percussionist Steven Schick, performing in a temporary home studio that doubles as a laundry room, gave a riveting account of Vinko Globokar’s 1973 score “Toucher,” which requires the performer to recite lines from Brecht’s “Life of Galileo” while playing. Bang on a Can will present a second marathon on June 14th, with seven commissions on tap.

Aficionados of improvisation and the avant-garde can gravitate toward the Quarantine Concerts, a daily online production by the Experimental Sound Studio, in Chicago. The other night, the violist Melanie Dyer, the violinist Gwen Laster, and the bassist Ken Filiano performed a grittily expressive improvisation called “Love in the Form of Sacred Outrage.” Music lovers of all stripes can embrace the work of the composer-bassist Florent Ghys, who has attained viral fame with videos attributed to the Cats & Friends Choir. Ghys’s pandemic ritual is to scour YouTube for vocalizing cats, sheep, and cows; organize their utterances by pitch; and edit them into approximations of familiar pieces, including Satie’s “Gymnopédies,” Pergolesi’s “Stabat Mater,” and Bach’s First Cello Suite. As with “Coronadämmerung,” silliness veers toward the sublime. Satie, for one, might have approved of being translated into meows and moos.

How long classical music will be marooned in the ether remains unclear. Chatter from larger organizations suggests that full-scale performances may not resume until sometime in 2021. The primary challenge of online music-making will be to persuade audiences to pay for it; in order for that to happen, events must rise above the feel-good, we’re-still-here level and achieve real substance, not to mention a comfortable grasp of the medium.

A sense of what’s possible comes from the Oslo Philharmonic, which has been producing rich-sounding, visually atmospheric live streams in a series it calls “Mellomspill,” or “Interlude.” In one memorable episode, the young Norwegian soprano Lise Davidsen, in refulgent voice, sang songs of Alban Berg, in arrangements by the late Dutch conductor Reinbert de Leeuw. Afterward came Wagner’s “Siegfried Idyll,” in its original version for thirteen players, as Cosima Wagner heard it on her birthday in 1869. This, too, is warm music tinged by sadness, and the wrenching loveliness of the playing had me in tears by the end. It seemed to emanate from some other world; that it came from the present felt like a flicker of hope. ♦

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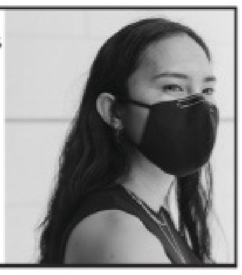

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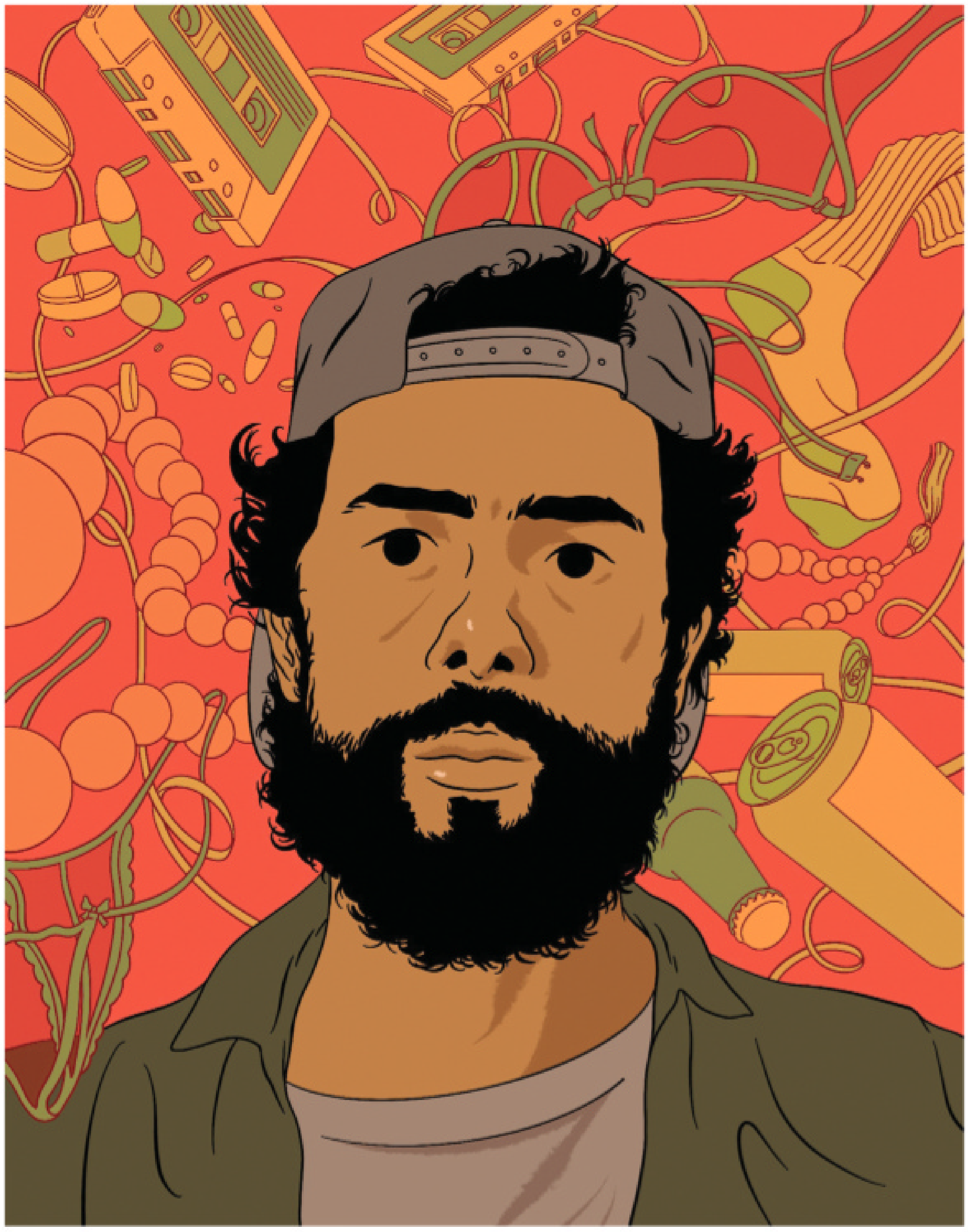
ON TELEVISION

HEAVEN FORFEND

"Ramy," on Hulu.

BY DOREEN ST. FÉLIX



Ramy Youssef plays a Muslim twentysomething searching for meaning.

The sexy cleric is ascendant. In HBO's "The New Pope," Paolo Sorrentino's baroque vision of the papacy, Jude Law is Pius XIII, a fetish object who rises out of the sea in a Speedo like a male Venus. A chic oppressor, he is either a saint or a sadist. He may have transcended the need for sex, but the sight of his obscured face, as he pontificates from the Vatican balcony—or the appearance of his likeness, or even the suggestion of his likeness—is enough to make his followers swoon.

Who could be more attractive than someone who has sworn off doing it? In the second season of Phoebe Waller-Bridge's "Fleabag," the antiheroine falls for a priest—yes, the hot one, played by Andrew Scott—whose lack of temperance has brought him only closer to his forever partner, the Almighty. Even in lighter sitcom fare, like "Derry Girls," the priest, Father Peter, is a figure of charged fascination, dreamy precisely because he's sexless. The conflation of religious and sexual desire is an old trope, but these shows' portrayals of yearning for the spiritual feel contemporary. The secular has left us with no rules to break and, therefore, no more thrills to gain. Tradition titillates the aimless. In the era of "Girls," sex was bad, in the sense that it was mundane. What better than faith to inject a hint of the sublime into the everyday, to elevate longing to the metaphysical?

The second season of "Ramy," a charming and melancholic autofiction written by the Egyptian-American comedian Ramy Youssef, benefits greatly from the arrival of Mahershala Ali as Sheikh Ali, the black American leader at a new Sufi center in northern New Jersey. "I want to change," Ramy, played by Youssef, tells his mystical new guide. "And I heard you can help me." "Ramy" has a more homespun texture than the torridly glamorous "Fleabag," but it is a similarly toothsome meditation on the verboten. It's a sincere comedy, about the struggle to find meaning. At the end of the first season, which débuted a year ago, Ramy, a Muslim twentysomething in New Jersey, is sojourning in Egypt, hoping to be cured of his dirtbag tendencies; he'd like to be devout, but he also likes having sex. In Cairo, he hallucinates in the desert on the way to see his grandfather, who he hopes will reveal the mysteries of the universe. His grandfather dies before they can talk. Bereaved and confused, Ramy falls for a woman whose relationship to him is, let's just say, problematic.

The new season, which premières at the end of the month, opens with Ramy back at home with his parents and sister. A Muslim Portnoy, he masturbates chronically. (In a flashback episode in Season 1, a middle-school-aged Ramy worries that 9/11 was punishment for his discovery of self-pleasure.) A dopey white convert suggests that he consult with the Sufi leader, and the sheikh doesn't disappoint; he speaks softly, in layered koans. Intimidatingly pious and patient, he gives hot chocolate to white supremacists protesting outside the center. "Our *bay'ah*, our bond, requires that we try to help those that are lost," he lectures, after recounting to an incredulous Ramy a parable about the Prophet's infinite love. When Ramy and the sheikh attempt to track down a dog trapped in an abandoned car, Ramy is ready to smash a window; the sheikh says a prayer and grins when he finds that the door is unlocked. There is a sensual charge to Ramy's obsession with his new teacher. Ramy's sister, Dena, voices the subtext: "Your sheikh

ILLUSTRATION BY AJ DUNGO

is fucking hot." When the sheikh rebukes Ramy for his immaturity and dishonesty, Ramy is heartbroken. After a brief separation, Ramy is reunited with his spiritual crush. "I miss you," he says, his eyes turning to dark pools.

The show, a co-production of A24 and Hulu, draws from Youssef's standup material, which is drawn from the comedy of errors that is his life. Youssef is a practicing Muslim, a diaspora kid who has spoken of being profoundly changed by the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment after 9/11. As a storyteller, he alternately resists and embraces the role of representative for all Muslim-Americans. "Just make your story narrow!" Youssef said recently, in an interview with *GQ*. "Stop trying to make something that's this rallying cry." In "Ramy," Youssef's persona is a contradictory mess—by turns holy, horny, and prone to light chauvinism. In the first season, when Ramy's parents set him up with a Muslim woman, her sexual agency freaks him out and he cowers, unable to bring himself to please her. "I'm in this little Muslim box in your head," she laments. "I'm the wife or the mother of your kids, right? I'm not supposed to come."

In the second season, the bumbling Ramy is on a quest to confront his own hypocrisies. As the sheikh endeavors to show Ramy that his grasp of Islam is superficial, Ramy, wanting badly to impress, ends up becoming only more destructive. His well-intentioned white lies take on mythological proportions when he convinces himself that he is in love with the sheikh's daughter, Zainab. The two families meet in a living-room tribunal, the Arab-American unit sizing up the sheikh and Zainab, who, wryly amused by their new acquaintances' breezy racism, gently call them out on their ideas about "the blacks." You should stop here if you want to avoid spoilers, although you will have seen the ending coming. Ramy, still using Islam to serve his own needs, wrecks the marriage before it has even begun—but, heartbreakingly for Zainab, after it has been consummated. "The Prophet had multiple wives, *salla allahu alayhi wa sallam*," Ramy tells her on their wedding night. "So I'm just looking at the whole path." The day after the union, Ramy wakes up to the imprint of his new wife on the mattress, and her ring on the hotel nightstand. The sheikh is sitting at his bedside, murder in his eyes: "Fuck you, Ramy. Fuck you."

The title of Youssef's show primes the viewer to expect that its star will provide the center of gravity, as Louis C.K. did in "Louie." But Youssef has the confidence to let his character recede into the background, if not entirely disappear, for whole episodes at a time. In January, Youssef won a Golden Globe for best actor in a comedy; the show, though, is best defined not by genre but by form—it's an anthology of delicate, interwoven fables. Some are failed experiments in shock comedy. Take the Season 1 episode in which Steve, a truthtelling asshole played by Youssef's real-life close friend Steve Way, who has muscular dystrophy, arranges a date with an underage girl. (Its mirror episode in the second season, set at Ramy's bachelor party, in Atlantic City, is a more sophisticated exploration of sexuality and disability.) In other episodes, Youssef embellishes the show's occasional surrealism with an underbaked wokeness. "Mia Khalifa," an episode set at the estate of an eccentric millionaire in Connecticut, is an indulgent fantasy sequence justified only by the fact that the titular former porn actor agreed to play herself.

But, at their best, episodes stand alone as quietly voyeuristic flights of mindful empathy. Youssef takes particular pleasure in his middle-aged secondary characters. I loved, in the new season, the heartbreaking character study of Ramy's uncle Naseem (Laith Nakli), a jolly brute who owns a jewelry store in the diamond district, and has secret rendezvous in the sauna at his local gym. In another episode, Ramy's father, Farouk (Amr Waked), who hasn't informed his family that he's now unemployed, fills out job applications at a coffee shop, where he tells the white barista that his name is Frank. The episodes devoted to Ramy's mother, Maysa, are jewel-like. Maysa (Hiam Abbass) is a suffocating nurturer who lavishes attention on her son but shuns her overachieving daughter. When Maysa starts driving for Lyft, she becomes intoxicated by the diversity of the outside world, and particularly infatuated with a French passenger, who makes her feel young. Later, she encounters a young nonbinary person who upends her cloistered politics. Abbass is stunning, locating the comedy in flustered yearning, the tragedy in cultural assimilation. And, in this season, she's got a monologue, whispered at a photograph of a smiling demagogue, that is divine in its profanity. ♦

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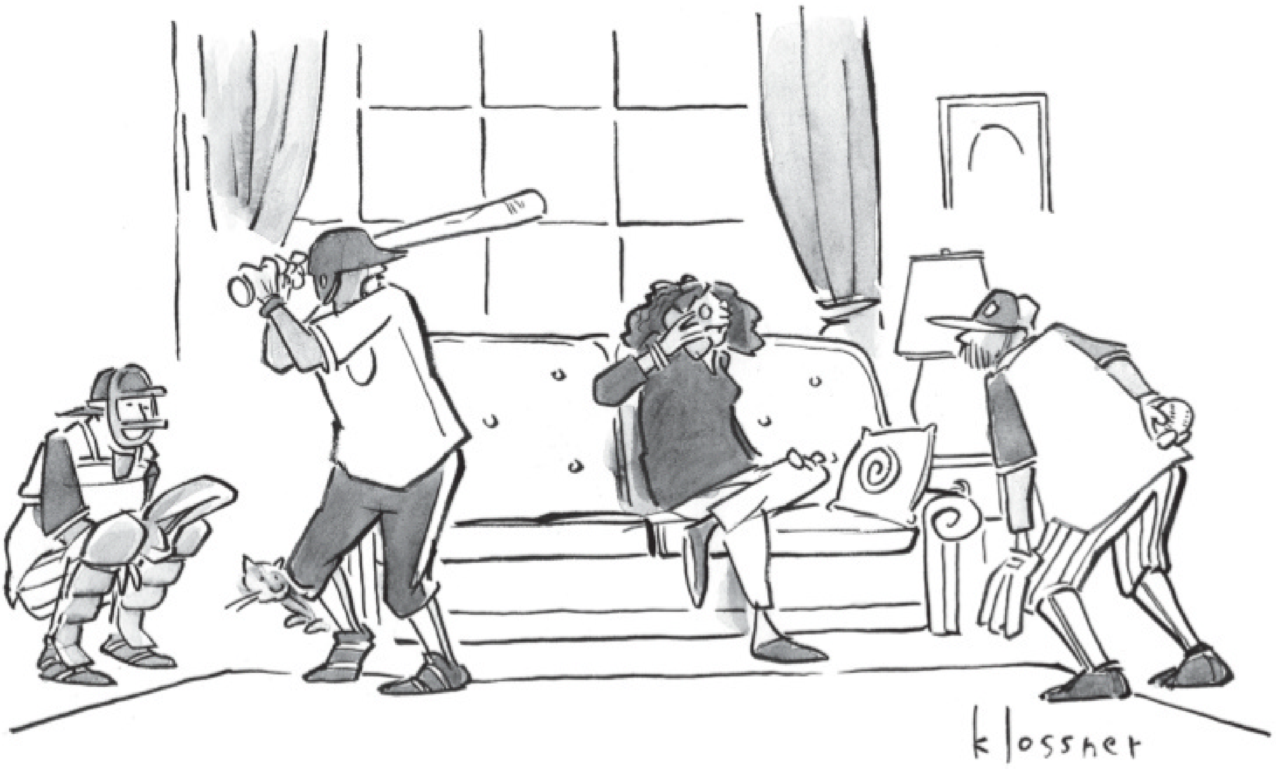
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by John Klossner, must be received by Sunday, May 24th. The finalists in the May 11th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the June 8th & 15th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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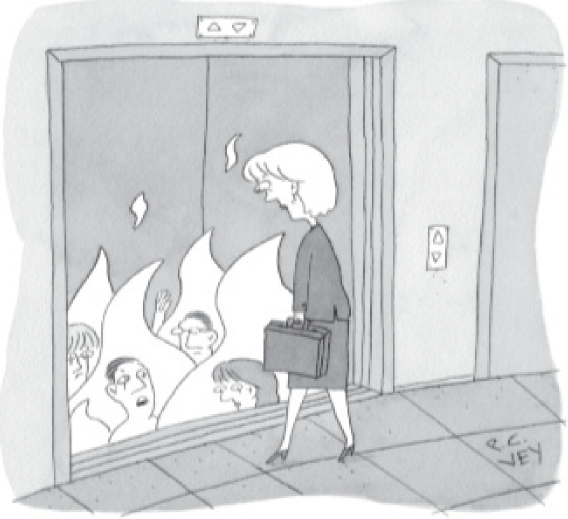
THE FINALISTS

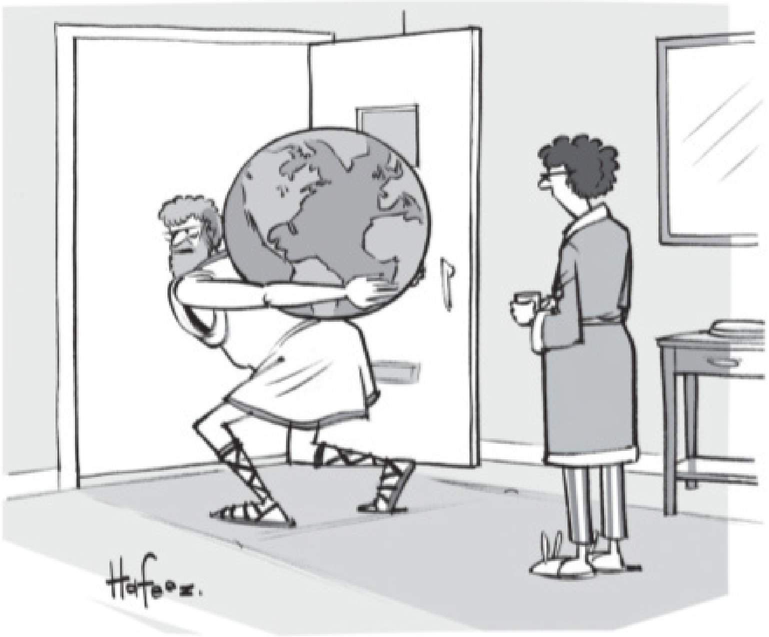


"We're temps—the eternally damned are back Monday."
Yvonne Todd, Auckland, New Zealand

"So now we know what the 'FIRE' button does."
Tim Craig, London, England

"Try the stairs. This takes an eternity."
Michael Crowley, Washington, D.C.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"Next week, I'll move Heaven for you."
Stephanie Miller, San Rafael, Calif.

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